

THE BOOK OF NAOMI: A NOVEL

by

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## Abstract

*The Book of Naomi* is a feminist science fiction novel with a queer, Jewish protagonist. It is a loose retelling of *The Book of Ruth* from the Torah set several hundred years in the future, in a universe where human contact with aliens and faster-than-light travel are commonplace, although not without conflict. Naomi Mandelbaum is a human pilot half the galaxy away from her home. When her ship explodes, she teams up with an alien engineer named Ruea to try and get back to Mars. On the way, they battle space pirates, crazy cults, cannibalistic millionaires, and, most frightening of all, their own feelings for each other. The book has an episodic structure, and contains aspects of several genres beyond space-opera style science fiction, including romance, road trip stories, gothic novels, horror, westerns, and dystopian fiction. It asks questions about autonomy in relationships: how much we change for others, how much we cling to our identities, how much we accept others as they are, and how much we ask them to change for us. It also explores how people react to the breakdown of communication, and the meaning and variety of genders and sexualities.

The Book of Naomi

By Zoe Kaplan

“Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Just walk beside me and be my friend.”  
—Jewish Folk Song

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Part 1

The blue light blinked on the dashboard in front of me, reflecting onto the stars. How long had it been going off? My stomach dropped when I realized I didn't know. I snatched up my communicator and radioed engineering.

"Ruea here!" The voice came in scratchy over the intercom

"Ruea, it's Naomi." I tried to keep my voice steady as I told her, "I've got a hazard light going off and I don't know why."

"I'll check it out. It's probably nothing, but tell the captain anyway, would you?"

"Got it. Helm out." I switched the destination of my call with a hurried press of a button.

"Captain Duncroff, do you read?"

"Yes, helm, what is it?" Even through the static the Captain's voice was always steady.

"I've got hazard lights going off and I'm not sure why, or for how long. Ruea's checking the engine. She thinks it'll be okay, but we should be prepared for any contingency."

"Understood. Greaff, ready the escape pods. Keep us posted, Mandelbaum. Captain out."

A quiet beep told me he'd disconnected the call.

I took a deep breath, tried and failed to calm the anxiety that was crawling from my stomach into my chest, and stopped the ship. Sometimes putting less strain on the engine prevented disaster. Sometimes it didn't. Especially if there were pirates lurking in the nearby asteroid clusters. I looked past the blue light and out my window to the stars. In the distance, the planet Crustea glowed faintly green. We weren't far from it—less than a day's flight away. The people of Litsea, the largest port city, were waiting for their cargo, and we could be bringing it to them right now.

Or, we could be moments from blowing up.

It was all the Crustians' fault, really. All that blue blood and those salt deposits. Why couldn't they have red hazard lights like a normal species? I hate to admit it, but I wasn't the most qualified pilot for this particular ship. I'd never flown a Crustian spacecraft before. I figured it would be easy, especially after my last commission—Crustians have two arms, at least. But I should have seen this light thing coming. I should have been paying attention. I should have—

"Engineering to helm!" Ruea's voice startled me out of my reverie. It was about twice as high as usual. "Naomi, it's the compression coil. It's shot, and we don't have a replacement. If I had more time I could—but I don't. The engine's not going to hold much longer. The Captain's going to make the evac announcement in a minute, but I wanted you to have a head start. It's a long way from the helm to the pods."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm headed out. You get a move on too."

"See you there. Engineering out."

I hesitated just a moment, then dashed out into the hall. Seconds later, the Captain's voice came booming out of the ship-wide intercom.

"Crew of the Packmule, this is the Captain. We must evacuate the ship immediately."

I broke into a sprint. The only sound was my boots hitting the metal of the corridor floor. It all seemed too calm, too still for a ship on the verge of exploding. When I reached the aft of the ship, all but two of the pods had already launched. The Captain stood outside the last pod.

"Get into that one," said Captain Duncroff, pointing. "Ruea's already in there. Launch as soon as you can. We meet at the port in Litsea. Good luck. He stepped into the pod. The doors shut.

I ducked into the remaining pod. Ruea was already strapped into one of the seats. She was staring at her knees, fiddling with her antennae, but looked up when she heard me step in.

“Naomi, you made it!” she said as I sealed the door.

I gave her a wan smile and bucked myself in, pulling the tiny nav computer towards me. I disconnected us from the ship and started up the thrusters.

Ruea’s antennae twitched into the Crustean equivalent of a nervous smile. “Do you know how to fly one of these things?”

“*Do* I? I’ve been flying pods like this around since high school! Don’t—”

The pod lurched to the side. The port windows were filled with fire for a split second, before the vacuum of space put it out. Ruea squeaked, clutching at the seat.

“There goes the ship,” I said.

Ruea’s shoulders and antennae sagged.

Neither of us spoke for a long time. I focused on the controls and tried to ignore the guilt that churned in my stomach. Escape pods are built to be flown by idiots, though, so after a few moments I needed to find something else to keep my thoughts off the explosion. My eyes fell on Ruea, who sat tapping her fingers together in her lap.

Number of arms aside, Crusteans are some of the least Terran-looking aliens I’ve ever met. The closest-looking Earth creature would be a lobster, but even that doesn’t quite work—Crusteans have no tails. Ruea was taller than me—six foot five and only average for a woman of her species. Her skin—or exoskeleton, really—was red, with a smattering of purple freckles across her flat nose and her shoulders. Her eyes were all pupil, a deep black that shone under any kind of light.



I'd spent enough time on Crustea to know that Ruea wasn't exactly beautiful by their standards. Her eyes were too big, and her shoulders were barely wider than her waist, which made her look kind of androgynous. By Terran standards she mostly looked like an alien, but I don't know, it's not like she was *un*-pretty. Terrans tend to like creatures with big eyes, and well, her freckles were kind of cute.

"Do I have grease on my face?" Ruea asked.

I realized I'd been staring at her. "No, sorry," I said. "Just lost in thought.

She nodded and leaned back, closing her eyes. "What do you think is going to happen?"

As though it had been listening to us, the little screen the control panel lit up. The Captain's face, weirdly distorted but clearly angry, stared out at us.

"Captain!" Ruea said, "Did everyone make it out alive?"

"Yes, thank the stars."

Ruea beamed, and even I felt myself relax a bit.

"For that reason," the Captain continued, "I'm not going to have you two arrested for endangerment. You're both fired, though, and this incident will go in your employee records."

Ruea visibly wilted. She gave a little gasp and buried her face in her hands.

"Captain, please," I said, "that's not fair! It was my fault the ship blew, not Ruea's! I'm the one who didn't see the hazard light,"

The Captain's gaze didn't waver. "Ruea didn't requisition a spare compression coil when we were last at port, and she didn't notice that the one we had was corroding. She failed to do her job as head engineer. I don't enjoy doing this, Mandelbaum, but you're still both fired."

"I'm sorry," Ruea whispered.

“I know,” said the Captain. “I am too. I’ll give you both your share of the insurance at port. Captain out.”

The screen went black. Ruea’s back began to shake, as if she were crying. Maybe she was.

I reached out and placed my hand on her knee. “Hey, it’ll be okay,” I told her.

She looked up at me, eyes shining. “How?” she demanded, her voice breaking. “With a mark like that on my record, I won’t find work in this sector ever again!”

I didn’t have a good answer, so I said nothing. To tell the truth, panic was forcing its way up my throat. I wanted to cry, too, but I didn’t feel like I had any right to.

Ruea sniffed and said, more clearly, “Do you have a plan?”

I looked up at the pod ceiling. “I’ll have to leave the system, I guess. Find work somewhere they don’t ask too many questions. Or maybe I’ll go home. It’s been years since I’ve seen my family.”

“Home. Sounds nice.”

“Can you go back to your family?” I asked.

“I don’t have any family.”

“What about friends? Or do you have a sweetheart?”

“No friends. It’s hard to make them in this line of work.”

I let out a quiet laugh. “I know the feeling.”

“No sweetheart either.”

“So you don’t have anywhere to go?”

She shook her head. “I have some savings. I’ll get a cheap room when we get back to the planet and try to figure something out.”

“I guess I’ll have to do that, too. Mars is far away. I doubt I have enough to book passage all the way home.”

Ruea stared at her hands, considering. “We should get a room together,” she said. “You know, to split the costs.”

“Good idea. I doubt that insurance money’s going to be anything.”

“Yes, that. And also...” Ruea looked at me, unsure, and then said with a shrug, “I don’t really want to be alone.”

I made myself smile. “Me either.”

Landing a pod is easier than landing a spaceship. They’re intended to be able to set down basically anywhere, so if you have a real landing pad in a real space port, you can almost do it in your sleep. Captain Duncroff was waiting when we landed. He handed us each a voucher for a hundred credits, less than a tenth of what we would have gotten if we’d delivered the cargo. Still, it was probably more than I deserved.

As soon as we left the range of the pod’s Universal Translator, my ears were assaulted by a blast of unintelligible sound. Crusteans and Terrans have incompatible vocal chords—we physically can’t speak each other’s languages—and Crustean wasn’t the only language being shouted between the ships. Everywhere captains barked orders to their crews, merchants haggled with customers, and hawkers shouted their prices to everyone in earshot. I didn’t recognize a single word. It was overwhelming.

I spotted a green-skinned Ysi man with bulbous hips proffering a tray of portable Translators and headed for him, pulling Ruea with me. When he saw us, he pointed to a sign

with his prices. I winced—twenty-five units was way too much for a bottom-grade plastic Translator—but bought one anyway.

The Translator itself was a small black cylindrical device with blinking green lights. I pressed mine to my neck, just below my left ear, and it stuck. A faint humming blocked the noise for a moment, and then the sounds all came back into focus. Crustean, Cheakso, Triasmian, Dystyi, Ekmozian, Ysi, and dozens of other languages sounded to me like plain Hebrew.

I flashed Ruea a grin. “Can you hear me?”

Ruea stopped fiddling with the translator, which was stuck on her left temple. “I can indeed,” she said. “Let’s find a place to stay.”

Most of the cheap hotels were just outside the spaceport. On our way to find one, we were offered everything from Ekmozian yams to distilled hydrogen to an orange crystalline substance that the seller promised would make us feel like we were “dancing on the stars themselves.” If this were a normal day at port, I might have been tempted, but I was painfully aware of the lack of credits in my account.

Finally we found a hotel that was less than forty credits per night and didn’t have any visible grime on the reception desk. I was obviously the first Terran the clerk had ever housed—he kept trying to sell me a room with a rejuvenation chamber, like Cheaksos use. It took me the better part of fifteen minutes to convince him that all I needed was a bed.

The room was small and shabby, but clean. The comforters were patterned with red and orange swirls, the kind that were fashionable forty years ago, but they were soft enough. I collapsed onto one of the beds the moment we entered the room, throwing my arms around

the pillow with a sigh. Ruea sat down delicately on the other one. She picked at a loose thread on the blanket.

“So what now?” she asked.

I turned over, tucking my hands behind my head. “Now? We order some pomadros, eat until we’re stuffed, and get a good night’s sleep. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

Ruea’s antennae twitched into a reluctant smile. “I could do with some pomadros. Want me to order?”

“Nah, I got it.” I stood up and went to the comm pad on the wall. “Looks like the cheapest option is Poreana’s Pomadros.”

“Fine by me.”

I tapped the menu icon. “Okay, so two meat ones for me. What do you want?”

“A vegetable one and an everything, please.”

“Right.” I tapped in her order and hit the “Deliver” button. A timer filled the screen: Ten minutes until our food got here.

“Do you really like meat pomadros?” Ruea asked. Her eyes followed me back to my bed.

“Yeah, I do.” I sat down and began unlacing my boots. “They remind me of goat, which I ate a ton of when I was a kid, so.”

“Goat?”

“Oh! Yeah, goats are a Terran mammal, maybe this big? Turns out they’re pretty hardy in space, so all the early Terran colonies are overrun with them.”

Ruea’s antennae crinkled with distaste. “Stars, why am I even considering going with you?”

I looked up. “You’re considering going with me?”

Ruea glanced down to her feet, immediately backtracking. “Maybe. I was thinking about it. Do you not want me to come?”

“To be honest, it hadn’t even occurred to me. I mean, no offense, Ruea, but we’re not really friends.”

She visibly wilted.

“Not that I dislike you or anything, but like, when have we ever spent time together? We were just attached to the same captain. Besides, if I can even find transport, it’ll be a month of traveling at the minimum. Probably longer, because I’ll have to stop and work to afford passage.”

“I know that. But right now, you’re the only person I know who doesn’t hate me.” She sighed. “I haven’t even made a decision yet. Don’t worry.”

The doorbell pinged. “I’ll get it,” Ruea said, without meeting my gaze. She took the bags from the delivery bot and tossed me one.

I pulled out one doughy sphere. “Do you want a bite of mine?”

“I can’t,” said Ruea, “I’m allergic to the cosel peppers.”

“More for me,” I said, and took a bite. My teeth sank into the soft bread and warm meat of the pomadro, and I sighed. “I’m going to miss this when I leave.”

“Do they not have pomadros outside the system?” Ruea asked.

“They do, but it’s not the same. Have you ever had pizza?”

“Yes, it’s good.”

“How much did you pay for a slice?”

“Maybe fifteen credits or so. Why?”

“Back home, you can get a whole pie for ten. And they’re like seven times better than the pizza on Crustea. Pomadros are the opposite.”

“I guess that makes sense. For pizza that good, maybe I should go with you.”

I laughed at that. “That’s the best reason I can think of! But don’t count on it. I doubt there are any ships that’ll take on passengers for less than three hundred credits a night. I’ll end up going planet by planet again, working odd jobs for the fare.” I crumpled up my pomadro wrapper and threw it at the trash can. It missed.

“We couldn’t even work for the first few planets,” Ruea said. “At least not as crew members. Nobody would hire us.”

“Exactly. So I’d have to take lower-paying jobs planetside—waitressing, maybe—which would take even longer. I wish there were a cheaper way to travel.”

“If only we could just buy our own ship, skip the hassle.”

By the way her antennae were curled, I knew she was kidding, and I laughed along. But too soon it fell silent, and it stayed that way. I finished my second pomadro and began folding the wrapper into smaller and smaller pieces.

Then, quietly, Ruea said, “Hey Naomi?”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like to go to Mars with you, if you’re okay with that.”

I sat up straighter in bed. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Why?”

“I don’t have anything keeping me here. And, well, most people would have left me the minute the we got to port, and you didn’t. I like that about you. I’ll stay with you if I can.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “I don’t think you understand, Ruea. Even if we get back, there’s no guarantee you’ll find work there, either. It’s just a small colony. I’m only going because my family’s there. The trip’ll suck, and there’ll be nothing for you at the other end.”

“No, *you* don’t understand, Naomi. I have *nothing* here and *nowhere* to go. We’ve only known each other for a month or something, but you’re the closest thing I have to a friend.” Ruea sniffed like she was going to cry, but recovered herself. “Wherever you go, I’m going too. Wherever you settle, I’ll settle, at least for a while. There’s nothing else I can do, Naomi, so don’t you try to change my mind.”

I was stunned for a moment. “I just don’t want you to regret going with me,” I said.

“I won’t,” said Ruea.

I sat back against pillows, smiling to myself. No way Ruea would stay with me all the way to Mars, but it would be nice to have a companion, at least for a while. I’d never traveled with a friend before.

Soon after, I took a shower. I stared at the rusty shower head, letting the hot water run over me. I kept replaying our last conversation over in my head. Something was sticking in my mind, some idea that I just couldn’t quite put into words yet. Then it hit me. I leaped out of the shower, threw a towel around my body, and raced into the room.

“Ruea, you’re a genius!” I cried.

Ruea had been half-dozing, but she started awake. “What?” Her eyes glanced over my barely-covered body before jerking up to look me in the face.



I realized all at once how stupid I must look, dripping wet with soap still in my hair. I couldn't stop just a teeny bit of a blush, but I carried on anyway. "We should buy our own ship!"

"I was joking. Terrans joke, right?"

I rolled my eyes. "I know you were joking, but just listen to me. There's no reason we couldn't do it ourselves."

"Sure there is. You ever heard of a ship with a crew of two?"

"Yeah. Some of the first exploratory vessels had crews of two, or even one. And space travel was way harder back then."

"Yes and most of them exploded!" Ruea tugged her covers up to her chin. "I've had enough exploding for a lifetime."

"Oh my God. Listen to me, Ruea! What do you even need to fly a spaceship? Someone to keep it running," I gestured to her, "and someone to point it in the right direction." I gave a little bow, holding onto my towel.

Ruea tilted her head skeptically. "Well, a navigator for one. A copilot. A second engineer for when a job requires more than two hands—need I go on?"

"They can do amazing things with autopilot and nav computers these days. And you're a phenomenal engineer! You can make it work."

Ruea shook her head, but didn't contradict me. Instead, she said, "It's too expensive."

"I bet buying a used ship is less expensive than booking passage on a freighter. We don't have to turn a profit, they do, you know?"

"Even if that were true, we'd have to buy all our own supplies. Besides, it's too dangerous."

“It’s not *that* dangerous. And if it comes down to it, I’m pretty handy with a blaster.” I pretended to flex.

Ruea groaned. “Finish your shower. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

I put my hands up in a gesture of surrender. “You got it. Sleep well.”

“G’night.” Her eyes were already closed.

The next morning, Ruea and I went to one of the Spacer Surplus stores that were ubiquitous in port cities across the galaxy. They sold all the basics—durable, unflattering clothing, small bottles of hygiene supplies, spare engine parts, cheap electronics, even low-powered blasters. Since we lost almost everything in the explosion, we had a real shopping spree. I even managed to find a couple T-shirts that weren’t deeply hideous, which was a real accomplishment. Ruea bought almost everything they had that was frilly or glittery. When I remarked on it, she shrugged and said, “I just like to be feminine, when I can. As long as it doesn’t get in the way of my work, you know.”

I nodded, but didn’t make any comment. If I were to guess, I’d say she was trying to compensate for her figure. *Not that she needs to*, I thought. Watching her try on clothes, I noticed again that she was pretty damn cute. Not even ill-fitting, starched clothes could disguise that.

When we had everything we needed, Ruea stepped outside and hailed a taxi. She started to tell the address to the automated driver, but I cut her off. “Can we run one more errand? There’s something I want to look for.”

“Sure,” she said, “where is it?”

I spoke the address into the cab's input sensor, and it took off, speeding down the crowded street. It brought us to the edge of the port district, where bustling marketplaces gave way to massive shipyards full of silent ships. Finally, it rolled to a halt, and I got out. Ruea followed me and stared up at the sign, shielding her eyes from the orangeish sunlight. She groaned. "Galaxy Joe's Used Spaceships? Really, Naomi?"

I flashed her a sheepish grin. "It can't hurt to look, right?"

She groaned again, but this time it was to disguise a laugh. "You're impossible. Is that a '57 Rodesha?"

"Um, maybe?" Despite spending most of my adult life on board ships, I wasn't great at distinguishing makes and models. All that mattered to me was whether it could fly or not, and I could fly almost anything.

Ruea, however, clearly did. She was running her fingers over the nearest ship, a gleam in her eye that I'd never seen before. I hurried over to her.

"Good choice, young lady," said a voice from behind us. "You clearly have an eye for ships." The voice belonged to a balding Dystyi man with a purple-tinged scalp and a hungry grin. "I'm Galaxy Joe. Pleased to meet you."

"You too," said Ruea. "My name is Ruea, and this is my friend, Naomi Mandelbaum." She took his offered hand and shook it.

"Charmed, charmed." He pumped her hand up and down no less than five times before letting her go and continuing. "So what are you ladies looking for? A little moon cruiser, perhaps? A star hopper?"

"A little bigger than that," I said. "We're actually hoping to leave orbit."

Galaxy Joe's eyebrows shot up. "Really? What kind of budget are you looking at?"

“What do you think, Ruea? Two thousand credits?”

“We could probably cover twenty-five hundred, if we skimp on our food budget.”

Galaxy Joe made a hissing sound through his teeth. “That’ll be tight, but Galaxy Joe has ships for every budget!” He gestured to his sign, which said the same thing. “I’ll take a look, see what I’ve got for you girls. Follow me!”

We trailed behind the salesman as he led us between the rows. Hulking freighters towered over our heads, and little racer pods that were barely bigger than a canoe rocked in the morning breeze. Ruea kept up a constant commentary as we walked, most of which went over my head.

“Oooh, that’s a Lazerback! I used to work on one of those, wonderful ship, super fast, and if you keep the engines clean they’ll run forever. There’s no way we can afford one, though, don’t even bother looking. Oh. My. God. Is he really asking seven thousand credits for a Delanian? A ’18 Delanian? That’s highway robbery. Those ships are crap, too, they fall apart as soon as you hit orbit. I mean, if it were the ’28 or ’29 model I’d believe it, but an ’18?” She gasped and grabbed my arm. “Don’t tell me that’s a Corsican Cruiser! I haven’t seen one of those since I was a kid! I wonder if it still runs.”

I glanced down at her fingers wrapped around my arm. It was strange to have her touch me so causally. It’d been ages since I’d had a proper friend, someone I was comfortable with. I kind of liked it.

“Here’s a real beauty,” said Galaxy Joe, stopping beside a ship that even *I* knew was too small. “She’ll take you anywhere you need to go. Top speed’s off the charts, and the helm has velvet upholstery.”

Ruea scoffed. “We’re looking for a ship that’ll get us *out of orbit*. Does that thing even have an interstellar drive?”

Galaxy Joe pulled at his shirt collar. “Alright, alright, I see you ladies drive a hard bargain. But! I have something that may interest you around back.”

He led us to a mid-sized ship that was lying on its side behind the dealership. “This is the Corsican Nebula. A finer ship you’ll never see on this planet or any other. Durable, cozy, and barely ten years old.”

Ruea gave it an appraising look. “Not too bad,” she said. “Can we look inside?”

“Of course,” said Galaxy Joe, flashing us a neon grin.

I followed Ruea into the ship. “Cozy” wasn’t exactly the word for it—“cramped” is the word I’d use—but I could make it work. Four bunks, a tiny galley, a cockpit with controls I was familiar with. And for all she was small, the ship was in good condition. No rust inside or out, and the dashboard’s levers and dials all moved smoothly.

Ruea lowered herself into the engine room under the floor. There was a faint banging noise, and then she said, “It looks good, especially considering how old the thing is.”

I stuck my head out the door. “We’re interested,” I told Galaxy Joe. “How much is she?”

“Oh, not much, not much at all. Just four thousand.”

“Four thousand!” came Ruea’s voice from the engine room. There was another banging noise, and she emerged, clutching her head. “We said we couldn’t go any higher than twenty five hundred!”

Galaxy Joe gave us a rueful smile. “Well, for such lovely ladies as yourselves, I could be compelled to part with her for thirty-five hundred. I’d be taking a loss.”

I shook my head. “We really can’t pay that much. Sorry.”

Ruea pushed past me into the sunlight. “I told you this wouldn’t work, Naomi. Come on, let’s go back to the ho—” She stopped abruptly, and I nearly ran into her.

“What is it?”

“Look at that one,” she said, pointing.

I looked. I couldn’t see what was so special about the ship. It was tucked in the back corner of the lot, almost hidden by the ships around it. It was larger than the Nebula, but run-down and ramshackle. “What about it?”

“It’s a Lorelei. They were the best manufacturer in the business, but they closed down, what, fifty years ago? I didn’t know there were any left.”

Galaxy Joe hesitated. “I doubt you ladies want that ship. She hasn’t left the ground in nearly ten years.”

“I’m with him,” I said. “It looks like the bottom’ll fall off completely the moment we get into the air.”

Ruea didn’t respond. Instead, she took a slow step towards the ship, as though she were enchanted. “Loreleis are durable,” she said, almost to herself. “Especially the B-78. The B-78 was built to last.”

“Is that what it is?” I asked.

She ignored me.

I followed her to the door of the ship. She reached out and laid a hand on its dented metal shell, and said, “Does she have a name?”

“The Roadblock,” said Galaxy Joe.

Ruea laughed. “So she’s always been like this! How much are you selling her for?”

He took a deep breath. “Two thousand. Fixer-upper rate.”

“Do you want to look inside?” I asked Ruea.

“Let’s,” she said.

I pulled myself up the external ladder and into the ship’s main corridor. It was dingy, and dark too, until I pressed the lightstrip on the wall. The Roadblock had been kept clean, but you could still tell she’d been docked too long. Ships get restless, just like people do, and the air was downright twitchy. The metal walls were a dark tealish color, and the floor was carpeted. Four doors branched off the sides of the hallway, and another one stood at its end. There was a hatch in the floor that I assumed led to the engine room.

I opened one of the side doors and peered inside. It was a bedroom with two bunks, a dresser, and a closet, all bolted to the walls and floor. They were all made of dull grey metal, minus the thin mattresses on the beds. Another door on the left hand wall of the bedroom led to a tiny bathroom that attached to an identical bedroom beyond it. I checked the rooms on the other side of the hall. One of them was the same, but the other was clearly the captain’s quarters. Instead of a second bed, it contained a desk and a padded armchair.

Beyond the door at the far end of corridor I found a galley and lounge. The galley part was well equipped, with a large oven and a uv-sanitizer and more cupboards than I could imagine filling. There wasn’t much counter space, but the huge, circular table in the middle of the room more than made up for it. The table was ringed by a metal bench that looked cold and uncomfortable. The other side of the room was lined with surprisingly cozy couches. They were faded and a little threadbare—the foam was poking out in one corner—but that just made them homey looking.

On the other side of the room was the door to the cockpit. The inside was dominated by a 270 degree window that currently only showed the overgrown edges of the lot. Three swivel

chairs were anchored to the floor in front of the dashboard, intended for a pilot, copilot, and navigator. I plunked myself down in the center one and pushed it to the edges of its reach. If I leaned, I could get to all the buttons. I checked, and thank God, the hazard lights were red.

I turned on the nav computer and had a look at the maps. They only covered the Crustean system. It seemed the Roadblock had never been used for deep space travel before, though she was clearly capable of it. If I bought some map patches, she'd work for me perfectly.

I made my way back to the stern of the ship, where Ruea was pulling herself back into the top deck. "How's the engine?" I asked.

Ruea sighed. "The good news is, B-78s really are built to last. As long as nobody deliberately tampers with the engine, it'll run to Mars and back a dozen times."

"And the bad news?"

"Someone did tamper with it. Badly. Some quarter-brain in the '60s decided she needed a new water recycler, which I doubt, and they did a shoddy job installing it. It's not a closed loop anymore. If we get her, we'll have to stop for water *at least* every other week, which makes this whole ordeal slower and more expensive. And there's more."

"Shit, what?"

"She runs on combustable fuel."

I groaned. Ships hadn't been built with combustable engines for decades, which meant fuel was hard to find and expensive, not to mention dangerous. "So we can't get her?"

"I wouldn't say that. Even with water and fuel, she's cheaper than booking passage would be. I hate to admit it, but you were right."



“Of course I was right!” I clapped Ruea on the back, a gesture that was more familiar than I actually felt.

Galaxy Joe was so pleased that someone was finally taking the Roadblock that he let us store it on his lot for free. We filled the spare bedrooms with food— mostly freeze-dried meal packets—fuel, medicine, and water. So much water. Into the gaps we stuffed our new Surplus clothing and all the random bits we thought we might need.

I also bought used map patches to cover the rest of our journey. Most of them were a few years out of date—even as much as a decade—but the truth is, not much changes in space. Orbits can be predicted hundreds of years in advance. Only chumps buy new maps. Ruea bought spare parts—dozens of spare parts. Not having that compression coil really shook her up, it seemed. She got four of them.

Two days before we were scheduled to leave, Ruea and I sat on the loading dock of the Roadblock, watching the sun set red over the city skyline and eating piping hot pomadros.

“It’s crazy,” Ruea said. “Even though I’ve spent the last couple years on ships all the time, it still feels like the first time I’m leaving.”

“I don’t know that it’s crazy,” I said with a shrug. “It’s the first time you’re not coming back.”

“Did you feel this way when you first left home?”

I leaned back against the cool metal. “Not really. I didn’t give myself enough time to feel much of anything. The whole thing was pretty dramatic.”

“More dramatic than a ship exploding?”

I laughed. “Not quite, but close. I wanted to drop out of university, my parents got pissed, and I left in the middle of the night.”

Ruea looked at me, surprised. “You ran away? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Technically, no. I was a legal adult. I left.”

“You ran away.”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, of course not.” Ruea sighed and leaned back so we were on eye level. “I just wish I’d been, I don’t know, brave enough to go after what I wanted like that.”

“Well, it was a terrible idea. It turns that if you don’t have a degree or any professional experience, it’s really hard to get hired.”

Ruea snorted.

“I don’t know.” I tucked my arms behind my head. “I don’t regret leaving. I just wish I’d been more prepared.” I put on a smile and rolled over to face Ruea. “You’re plenty prepared for this journey. Because you’re smart!” I tapped her lightly on the cheek.

She cast her eyes away, a smile on her antennae. “No, it’s because I have you.”

This was getting far too heavy for me, so I sat back up and raked my fingers through my hair. “Well, we’re not ready yet. I still have a few personal effects to pick up from this storage place before we can go.”

“I do too, actually,” said Ruea, propping herself up on an elbow. “It’s called Realy’s Storage, I think.”

“Hey, my stuff’s there too! We can go together.”

Realy's Storage was an immense lot made up of massive concrete blocks and blue painted doors, ranging from cubbyholes to vast garages large enough to fit the Roadblock three times over. My locker was nearest the entrance, so we went there first. It was closet-shaped, five feet high, two feet wide, and four feet deep. It was larger than I really needed, but it's what had been available two years ago when I came to Crustea. It wasn't like I had a lot of belongings.

"What are these?" Ruea asked, holding up a pair of silver-plated candlesticks.

"They hold candles," I told her. "You use them for Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest."

"Jewish? Is that like a religion?"

"Yeah."

"But I thought the Terran religion was Christianity."

I laughed. "Sure, all Terrans are Christians the way all Crusteans are Taseanists."

Ruea grimaced. "Sorry, that was a dumb thing to say."

I clapped her on the shoulder. "Yep. But you're not the first person to say it. I'm used to it. Plus, I'm not really Jewish anymore."

"I understand. I was sort of a Taseanist, but I never really bought into the whole 'if you're good enough, you become a god' thing."

I shrugged. "It's not that I don't believe exactly. I mean, I don't think about it that much. In space, who has time?"

"Is this scarf a Jewish thing too?"

I took the teal strip of fabric from her and considered it. "Yeah. It's a tallit—a prayer shawl."

“I’m surprised you hung onto this stuff,” Ruea said as I pulled out a dusty brass menorah, “since you don’t practice or anything. You could have gotten a cheaper storage plan.”

I sighed. “I know. I just could never bring myself to part with it. It’s all I have of my family, you know?”

“Even though you ran away from them?”

“I guess.”

Ruea gave a quiet scoff but didn’t elaborate on it. Instead, she reached around a pair of winter boots to pick up a small black box. “What’s in here?”

“Just an old photo display. Look if you want. Hey, I do have some clothes in here!” I took the armful of sweaters and started re-folding them to fit in my bag.

“Is this your mother?” Ruea asked, tilting the screen towards me.

I looked. “Nah, that’s my grandmother. My mom’s in the next one, I think.”

Ruea swiped to see the next picture. “She looks a lot like you.” Then she laughed. “Sorry, I have no idea if she actually looks like you. She looks Terran and you look Terran. It’s hard to tell you apart without antennae!”

“Well, you’re hard to tell apart without hair.”

Ruea ran her fingers across her bare scalp. “I’d look stupid with hair. Who are these people?”

“Ruea, I’m folding sweaters here. You have to *show* me the picture.”

She did.

“Those are my old crewmates, actually. You know, from my criminal past,” I added with a wink.

Ruea laughed and handed me the display back. “Is that everything?”

I fished a pair of earring out of the back corner of the locker. “I think so. Shall we?”

It was nearly a ten minute walk to Ruea’s locker, which was not fun with full bags. She had the smallest plan, a little two foot cube of a cubby. It was only half-full too. She had a traditional Crustean-style vest embroidered in gold, her graduation robes, a jewelry box, and a photo display of her own.

I picked it up and turned it on.

“Hey, give me that back!” Ruea tried to grab it but I twisted away.

“I showed you mine!”

Ruea sighed. “Fine.

The first picture was of Ruea, just a couple years younger, with her arm around another Crustean girl. My understanding of Crustean beauty standards may be surface level, but even I could tell this girl was *hot*.

“Who’s this?” I asked, tilting the display so she could see.

Ruea’s shoulders sagged. “My ex, Emiliaea.”

“Holy shit, you *dated* this girl? Damn, I’m impressed.”

“Don’t be. She was a bad person.” Ruea dumped the rest of her things into her bag. “Can we go now? We told Galaxy Joe we’d be gone by noon, and we still have to load this stuff up.”

“Just a minute.” I flipped through the next few pictures. Every one of them was of Ruea and her ex, with a variety of backdrops and other friends. In all of them, Emiliaea and Ruea were clinging to each other, almost sloppily. There was a light in Ruea’s eyes that I’d never seen before. “You look happy in these.”

“I’ll be happy if we don’t miss our takeoff block,” Ruea snapped. “Come on, there’s nothing interesting in there. Just give it to me.”

“If she was so awful, why do you hang onto these?” I asked, handing the display back.

“Why do you keep your candlesticks?”

I didn’t answer.

Finally, we were ready to take off. I strapped myself into the pilot’s chair just as Ruea commed me from the engine room.

“We’re ready down here. Twenty seconds to blast-off!”

“Thrusters directed,” I replied, turning the appropriate knobs. “Atmospheric shielding engaged.”

“Fourteen. Thirteen.”

“Nav computer on.” The cockpit filled with green light from the screen.

“Ten. Nine.”

I thumbed in the coordinates. “Course locked in. Ready when you are!”

“Six. Five. Four.”

I spread my arms wide to reach both the pilot and co-pilot’s engagement levers. The ship began to rumble beneath me. My stomach jumped into my throat. No matter how many times I do it, blasting off is still amazing.

“Two. One. Blast off!”

I pulled on the levers, hard. The Roadblock shuddered, and for a terrible moment I thought she wasn’t going to get off the ground. But then I felt the extra Gs pinning me to my seat. A grin spread slowly over my face as I watched the shipyard fall away. The horizon

grew until we were far enough away to see the green glow of the atmosphere, and then suddenly gravity let go completely. My stomach lurched, and I grabbed hold of the armrests to keep me in my chair.

“Ruea, gravity!” I shouted.

“On it!”

I dropped back into the seat and sighed with relief.

“Sorry for the delay. How are things up there?”

I swiped through my displays. “Everything looks normal. I don’t want to jump to FTL until we’re out of the system, so we’re pretty much clear until tomorrow. How’s the engine?”

“She’s great. I’m going to run some checks, but once that’s done, mind if I come up?”

“Sure thing,” I said, and turned off the comm. I adjusted our course by two degrees, just because I could, and watched the stars shift outside my window. I breathed in the recycled air and sighed quietly. This was where I belonged.

Part 2



Ruea tapped at the door to the cockpit.

“Come on in!” I said.

She slid into the navigator’s seat. “How are we doing?”

I tapped on the nav computer’s display. “Have you ever worked with one of these before?”

“No. Actually, this is only the third time I’ve ever sat at a helm.”

“Well no rush, then,” I said, gesturing to the window. “It’s quite the view.”

I watched the stars reflecting in her black eyes. “To think I work in this every day, and I never get to see this. It’s beautiful.”

“Come visit me up here any time you like.”

“I will.”

I realized I was staring, and cleared my throat. “Okay, so that green dot is us,” I told her, pointing back at the nav screen. “The solid blue line is where we’ve been, and the dashed line is where we’re going.”

“And that curve at the bottom is Crustea?”

“Yep. With the zoom we’re at, we can’t see the whole thing, but I can change that if you want.”

“And that circle there’s Illacea, right?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s so cool! Okay, so what are those speckles there, at the top of the screen?”

“Oh those? That’s the asteroid belt.”

Ruea’s hand fell to her side. “Naomi, why is the dashed blue line going through the asteroid belt?”

“Because we’re going through the asteroid belt. It’s a pretty clear shot once we’re through.”

“We are *not* going through an asteroid belt.”

I couldn’t help laughing at her shock. “Why not? It’s perfectly safe.”

“No it’s not! People die in asteroid belts all the time!”

“So? People can die in any part of space, if they don’t know what they’re doing. And luckily, you have a pilot who knows what she’s doing.” I winked at her.

“Have you even done this before?”

“Dozens of times. While you were on the ship, even. We’ll be fine.” This wasn’t strictly true. I’d flown through asteroid belts perhaps five times, and never with Ruea, but there was no reason to make her more worried.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” I laid a hand on her arm. “I promise, you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“If you’re sure...” she was looking right into my eyes.

I cleared my throat and pulled my hand away. “I’m sure. Besides, flying around would take us a day and a half out of our way.”

“Fine then.” Ruea slumped back in her chair and didn’t object again.

Two hours later, Ruea was tucked up in the copilot chair, chewing on her fingertips. I slowed us down to a crawl and kept my hands steady on the controls as the first asteroid drifted by.

Ruea winced, even though it was yards away from our hull. Her antennae were pointing straight up with anxiety.

I sighed. “Would it make you feel better to watch the nav screen, or worse?”

“Better.” Her voice came out a squeak.

I swung the display around to face her.

Ruea bent over the screen as I readjusted the thrusters and flew us deeper into the belt. Tiny rocks no bigger than my fist bounced noiselessly off the nose of the ship. They didn’t worry me—the hull was strong enough to withstand thousands of little hits like that. It was the big ones I had to watch out for. I tweaked course slightly to the left to avoid one half the size of the ship, and then down and to the right. The asteroids glided past like whales, huge and graceful and silent.

The only sounds were the soft thrumming of the ship’s engines and the occasional gasp from Ruea when she thought I was too close to something. My shoulders began to ache, and my fingers trembled on the wheel, but I didn’t dare relax them.

We were in the thickest part of the belt now, surrounded by rocks on all sides. Gaps big enough for the Roadblock to slip through were becoming harder and harder to find. In the distance, the stars shone cold and steady. You forget, sometimes, how quiet space is when you’ve got a crew of nine all tripping over each other in a freighter. Out here, with just Ruea and the Roadblock, I could imagine why early spacers went mad so often. Even the huge, terrible rocks that could crush us into oblivion were perfectly silent.

I edged the Roadblock between two asteroids, each of which were the size of the hotel we’d stayed in back in Litsea. She barely slipped through, but the end was now in sight. The rocks thinned out in front of us. I kept holding my breath.

Suddenly, the Roadblock rocked to the side. For a crazy moment, I thought the ship was screaming, but it was Ruea. She’d fallen out of her chair.

“Are we hit?” she gasped.

“I don’t think so.” I frantically flipped through displays, trying to find the problem. “We cleared all the asteroids. The thrusters are fine. What’s the—shit.”

“What?”

“There’s a grappling hook stuck on our plating somewhere.”

“A grappling hook? But there’s no one out here!”

“Clearly there’s someone, or there wouldn’t be a hook up our ass!”

“Is that them?” Ruea pointed out the side of the window.

I leaned forward to see what she was seeing. A ship emerged from behind one of the larger asteroids. It was cobbled-together, made out of parts from so many different ships that I doubted even Ruea could list them all. The whole thing was painted black, except for an insignia under the helm. A skull and crossbones.

“What are we going to do?” Ruea whispered.

“Fight back.” I pulled a small blaster from my belt. “I don’t know how much we can do, but I’m not going down without a fight.”

“Where did you get that? Ruea asked, a note of panic in her voice.

“Spacer Surplus,” I said. “You didn’t notice?”

“Can you get away from them?”

“I can try.” I set the blaster on the dashboard and tugged at the steering column, but it was no use. The pirate ship used any momentum I generated to get even closer to us, and if I went too fast, I risked ripping the plating off the hull or crashing into an asteroid.

“Would more power help?”

“Not the problem.” A clanging sound rang through the ship. “Damn, they’ve latched on.”  
I slammed my hand against the dashboard. “They’re gonna board us any minute.”

“What do we do?” Ruea repeated.

I shook my head, trying to think. “If we stay here, we can defend the cockpit door. Bottlenecks are always good. But they’ll have access to the engines, and they’ve certainly got more people than us. We can’t win that way.”

“Can we win at all?”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t know. Probably not.”

“But—but we’re going to try?”

“Fuck yeah, we’re going to try. Can you find a way to jam the lock?”

Ruea nodded and rushed to the control panel by the door.

Moments later, the sound of boots stamping towards us filled the room. I stood and aimed my blaster at the door. “Get behind me,” I hissed.

She did. The footsteps drew closer, pausing on the other side of the door. For a minute, nothing happened. The only sound was Ruea’s panicked breathing and the low hum of the engine. I didn’t relax my arm.

Then, the doors sprung open. Ruea swore, and I fired. The person on the other side fell down with a cry, gripping their arm, but the pirate behind them returned fire. I threw myself the the side, dragging Ruea with me. I fired again, and again, but Ruea grabbed hold of my arm, and my bolts went wide.

“Don’t kill them,” she whispered.

Four pirates burst inside, blasters leveled at our chests. The fifth, a burly Crustean woman with a captain's sash, strode in between them. She pointed her blaster at Ruea, but looked straight at me.

"You set that down nice and gently, or your friend gets a hole in her head."

I bent my knees and placed my blaster on the floor. I slowly straightened, keeping my hands in the air. My heart was beating wildly, and a rushing sound filled my ears, but I kept my face as stony as I could.

"Search them," said the captain.

One of her lackeys, an orange-skinned man whose face was covered in tattoos, patted us down roughly. I was grateful, at least, that he didn't linger about it. "They're clean," he reported, and stepped back.

The Captain smiled. "Good. Then let's all calm down and have a civilized chat about this, shall we?" She waved us into the galley.

I couldn't see any option but to follow. As we walked, I reached behind me and squeezed Ruea's hand. She squeezed back.

"Why don't you have a seat on those couches there?" the Captain said.

Ruea and I sat.

The Captain stood in front of us with her hands on her hips. "Would the two of you be so kind as to direct us to your valuables? We'll find them either way, but think of the time we'd save."

"We don't have any valuables," Ruea squeaked.

“Pity.” The Captain swiveled and began to pace around the room. “Still, this ship’ll be worth a fair bit as scrap metal. And I imagine such lovely girls as yourselves will fetch a good price on the slave market.”

Beside me, Ruea stiffened.

The Captain turned to her crew. “Clean them out. You!”

The pirate who I’d shot, who was lying by the door, holding her arm, jerked her head up.

“Go back to the ship and get yourself fixed up.”

She nodded and got to her feet unsteadily, creeping against the wall.

The Captain returned her attention to us. She pulled out her blaster and pointed it at us.

“In case you decide to try anything.”

My mind raced, trying to come up with a plan. There were two of us and one of her.

We’d never get a better chance, but she still had the blaster. If we attacked, she could shoot us both before we even touched her.

Ruea suddenly lurched forward, clutching her stomach and retching. The Captain took a step back, disgusted, and lowered her blaster for a moment. That was the opening I’d been waiting for. I dived at her feet, meaning to knock her over, only to find that Ruea had done the same thing. We crashed into each other, but luckily, we crashed into the captain, too. All three of us toppled to the ground.

I stretched for the Captain’s blaster, but she held it over her head, out of my reach. Ruea jammed her elbow into the Captain’s side and I dug my fingers into the softer part of her exoskeleton under her chin. The Captain cried out, fingers loosening. I scrambled forward, sticking my knee into the Captain’s stomach plate in the process, and snatched up her blaster before she could take it back.

One of the other pirates, a Ysi woman with blue hair, appeared in the doorway. I shot twice. The first bolt missed, but the second hit her in the leg and she crumpled.

“Don’t kill them!” Ruea said again, plastering her hand over the Captain’s mouth.

“What is your deal?” I shouted, but I didn’t fire at the pirate again.

The Captain punched Ruea and she fell to the side, a hairline crack in her cheek. I shot, my bolt grazing the Captain’s arm and burning a hole in her exoskeleton. She screeched and launched herself at me, knocking the blaster from my grip. I rolled to the side, but she caught me anyway, wrapping her hands around my throat. I gasped for air. The joints of her fingers bit into my skin. I tried to jerk myself away but only succeeded in tearing the skin of my neck. White spots danced before my eyes, and my thrashing grew weaker.

Then, suddenly, her hands were gone. Ruea stood over me, holding a wrench, her chest heaving. The Captain was slumped on the ground beside me, the back of her head spiderwebbed with cracks.

I sucked in oxygen. “Thank you,” I gasped.

Ruea took a step backwards. The wrench clattered to the floor. “Is she dead?” she whispered.

I pressed my fingers to the Captain’s wrist. “I don’t think so.”

The Ysi woman seemed to just now come to her senses. “Bortolome!” she screamed. “Gresha! Somebody! Help!”

I scrambled to my feet, pointing the Captain’s blaster at her. “Don’t say anything else or I’ll shoot.”

The woman squeaked and put her hands up.

“Do you have a blaster?”



She nodded.

“Set it in front of you. Slowly!”

She did.

“Grab it for me, will you Ruea?”

Ruea fetched the blaster from the floor.

I took a deep breath and tried to make myself sound commanding. “Okay. Where are your crewmates?”

The Ysi woman shook her head.

“Tell me!”

She still said nothing.

Ruea put her hand on the pirate’s arm. “It’s okay,” she said, “we don’t want to hurt you. We just want our ship back.”

In a trembling voice, the pirate said, “They’re in the cargo hold. I was supposed to keep watch—”

“It’s alright,” said Ruea.

“No, you don’t understand, this was my first raid! They’ll kick me off the crew.”

Ruea’s antennae twitched into a wry smile. “I’m sorry, but you *did* attack us.”

I cut in. “The other pirates could be coming any minute. We’ve got to move.”

“What’s the plan?” Ruea asked.

I shrugged. “Sneak up and shoot them.”

“Okay, but we can’t kill them.”

“Oh my God!” I threw up my hands. “Ruea, do you want the ship back or not?”

Ruea’s face was stone. “We’ll find another way.”

“Seriously?”

“I will not be party to murder.”

“It’s self defense!”

“Not if you’re sneaking up on them.”

“They *attacked* our *ship*! We have a right to defend ourselves.”

“A life is a life.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Do *you* have a plan, then?”

Ruea grimaced. “I, ah—”

“Oh my God. You have got to be kidding me.”

“I’ll think of something. I got the Captain off guard, didn’t I?”

“Wait.” I glanced from the Captain’s body to Ruea. “That’s it! You pretend to be the Captain!”

“What? But we look nothing alike.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re both Crustean.”

“Are you saying we all look the same or something? Because that’s racist.”

“Of course not. I’m *saying* you both speak the same language. If I turn off the ship’s translator and you go on the comm claiming to be her, nobody’ll be able to tell the difference.”

“Yeah, and half the crew won’t be able to understand me.”

“But the other half *will*! They’ll translate for the others. I’ll take the Captain and the newbie back to their ship, make sure *you* don’t try to warn the others.” I prodded the Ysi woman with my blaster. “Ruea, shut down the translator and make up some lie to get them

off the ship. Tell them to disconnect, too. Once they're gone, we break off and jump to FTL before anyone knows what happened."

"Assuming she doesn't tell on us as soon as she's on the ship," Ruea said.

The Ysi woman shook her head frantically. "I won't say anything, I promise!"

"Do you know where we put those portable translators?" I asked.

"They're in the cabinet, there," said Ruea, pointing.

I grabbed one and smashed it on the table, making both Ruea and the pirate jump. Its blue light flickered, but didn't go out entirely. "Now to make sure you can't take it off. Ruea, do you have any adhesive in those pockets of yours?"

"Um, probably." Ruea rifled through the half-dozen pockets on her khakis and came out with a small tube of glue. "Don't try to remove this for at least twenty-four hours or it'll tear your skin," she told the pirate as I spread it over the back of the translator.

I pressed the thing to her neck. "Say something."

"Wqotycnoi," she said.

"Great. Let's go."

I made the Ysi woman lead the way down the hall. She had a hard time of it, with the wound in her leg and the Captain's dead weight in her arms, but she kept going. I respected that. I respected it so much that I didn't let the blaster's sights slip from her back.

The ship's doors had been pried open. She stepped through them with a nod, and then she was gone. Less than a minute later, the comm lights on the wall panels flickered on. Static and the clicking sounds of Crustean filled the air. I grinned.

Then, I heard a creaking sound. The engine room door was opening. I ducked into one of the empty berths. There was barely enough room for me to stand, pressed up against the huge

plastic containers of water. I listened as several sets of boots clomped past, but didn't dare leave until I heard the *hiss* of the ship detaching.

I burst through the bedroom door and ran to the helm. Ruea passed me on her way to the engine room.

"Translator's back on!" she called. "She'll be ready for FTL in a sec!"

"Got it!" I shouted back, already at the galley door.

I crashed into the pilot's chair and started up the thrusters. The last of the asteroids shot past, closer than I would have liked, but still missing us. I thumbed the comm and shouted, "We're clear to make the jump!"

"Ten seconds," Ruea said. I could hear a clanking behind her. "They tore the place up."

I checked on the pirate ship out the port window. "Shit, they're powering up. Ruea, we need to get out of here!"

"Almost got it—there! Ready to make the jump!"

"Jumping in five," I flipped a row of switches. "Four." I punched in general coordinates—nothing precise, but they'd get us closer. "Three." I strained to reach both engagement levers. "Two. One. Now!"

I yanked down hard on the levers as Ruea did whatever engineers do, and the stars blinked out. There was a drop in my stomach, like when you think there's one more stair on a staircase than there is and your foot goes crashing through the air. The Roadblock whined, shuddered—and then we were cruising

"Everything good down there?" I asked.

"Well, nothing fell off," said Ruea over the comm.

“I don’t have to make course corrections for at least an hour,” I told her. Now that we were safe, the wounds on my neck had started to throb. “I’m going to treat my cuts. How’s your cheek?”

“It hurts,” she admitted. “I’m alright though. Treating it sounds like a good idea.”

“Meet you in the galley.”

The medical supplies were stored in a compartment in the ceiling over the big table. I pulled down bandages and disinfectant for me. I didn’t know what Ruea would need, so I just left it hanging open.

Moments later, she appeared in the doorway. I winced again when I saw the cracks etched in her cheek. “You were amazing back there. I don’t know what you said, but it was super effective.”

Ruea laughed. “It wasn’t much. I told them that I—the captain, you know—was going to take the ship back whole, and if they didn’t get off it right then, I’d feed their spleens to space-dolphins. I think it was that last bit that really sold it. Plus, I crumpled up a bit of paper by the comm to make it extra stacy and hide my accent.”

“Ruea, you’re a genius!” I threw my arms around her, then drew back, flinching, when the motion pulled at my torn skin.

She looked down at my neck, antennae crumpling. “Are you going to be okay? Aren’t those cuts near important organs?”

“Yeah,” I said, unscrewing cap of the disinfectant, “but they’re not that deep. I’ll be fine. It probably won’t even scar. How about you? How do you patch a crack like that?”

She shrugged. “Just clean and cover it until it closes up. The lines never go away, though. Look.” She showed me the back of her hand. Sure enough, slender, faded white lines

crisscrossed across her knuckles. “I got those when I was eight, falling off a swing.” She laughed quietly. “Maybe these’ll make me look badass.”

I glanced at her floral button-down and pink-lined boots. “I’m not sure badass is exactly your style.”

Ruea smiled a bit. “Maybe not. Can I have some of that disinfectant?”

I tossed it to her. She smeared the cream across her cheek, and then covered it in a bandage. She stared down at her hands.

After a while, Ruea said, “You know, I’d never been in a fight before.”

I gaped at her. “Never? But you’re a spacer! People brawl all the time.”

She shook her head. “I’m kind of boring.”

“You’re not boring. You’re...” I searched for a good word. “Gentle.” I daubed my cut and winced as the disinfectant burned my skin.

“Do you want help with that?” Ruea asked.

“Yes please.”

Ruea moved to sit on the table beside me and took the tube from my hands. I clenched my teeth as she continued to clean my wounds.

Three hours and two painkillers later, our course was stabilized and the Roadblock was rumbling through space as smoothly as could be expected. Ruea stood at the stove, stirring a pot of rehydrated quirin meal and kidney beans while I sliced some of our precious fresh fruit to go with it.

“I can’t believe that was your first real fight,” I said. It was perhaps the fourth time I’d said something like that in the last few hours, but I could barely wrap my mind around it.

Some of my first experiences on board ship—and *especially* at port—involved fighting of some kind, anything from friendly sparring to ring fights to the kind of full-on battle we’d just had. And it wasn’t as though engineers didn’t join in. Ruea had just avoided it somehow. It didn’t make sense, but honestly, it was kind of adorable.

Ruea didn’t bother replying at this point. She just shook her head.

“I think I should warn you,” I said, “it probably won’t be our last one.”

Ruea shuddered, but still didn’t look up.

“And next time we may not be able to get away without anyone dying.”

“We will.” Ruea’s voice was emotionless in a way that betrayed more about how she felt than any tears could have. “You’re good.”

I let out a breathy laugh. “Not that good. Ruea, you’ve got to understand, we could end up in a situation where it’s us or them. And I’m not willing to die—not willing to let you die—just to uphold your sense of morals.” When she didn’t respond, I pressed on. “I don’t understand why you were so against the idea, anyway.”

“Against taking a life? Against *murder*? That seems pretty reasonable to me.”

I sighed. “It wouldn’t have been murder. We were defending ourselves! And anyway, they sold people into slavery. Think how many lives we might have been saving. It would have been a good thing, in the long run.”

There was a tremendous crash. Ruea had brought her fist down on the stove, rattling the pots and fixtures. “Don’t you dare talk to me about ‘good in the long run,’ Naomi. You don’t know. You didn’t even think to ask.” Her head snapped up, pain I never expected to see clouding her features. “Do you want to know?”

“Yes,” I said, because I did. I didn’t want to hurt her like this again, and I needed to know where the lines were.

Ruea turned off the stove but didn’t stop leaning on it. “I guess you wouldn’t know, it was before you got to Crustea, but right after Unification there was a lot of unrest among the factions that’d helped create it. More than unrest. My mother had been a pretty big deal in one of this factions, so as a gesture of peace, the Unified Government invited her and my father to one of their big galas. I was eight. I was too young to go, but I begged and begged and finally they let me come, as long as I could behave.” Ruea stopped and sat down, her back to the table.

I came to sit beside her, placing my hand on the bench next to hers, barely touching, just enough so that she’d know I was there if she wanted me to be. I could guess where the story was going, and the thought of it made me ill.

Ruea gathered herself and continued. “A group from one of the other factions broke in and shot the place up. They’d been my mother’s allies just weeks before, but that didn’t matter. In their eyes, we were all traitors to the revolutionary vision.” Her hands tightened on the bench. “I survived by hiding under a table. Most weren’t so lucky. Both my parents died, along with dozens of others. Good people, bad people, it didn’t make any difference. To them, it was justified. It was a good thing in the long run. But it wasn’t. Killing never is. It’s not our place to decide who lives and who dies.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was stupid and inadequate, but it was all I had. It would probably have been better to tell her she was right, that she’d converted me and I’d never fire a blaster ever again, but that would have been a lie.



I think she sensed that, because she pushed up off the bench and started pulling plates down from shelves. “Finish cutting that melon,” she told me, “the quirin’s getting cold!”

Part 3

“Morning” and “night” are relative terms on a space ship. There’s no sun to tell you when to be awake and when to sleep. Big, people-mover-type ships have artificial lighting that increases and decreases based on some programming that optimizes circadian rhythms or whatever, but in our little Roadblock, we had to make those decisions ourselves. Ruea slept late relative to me, so much so that I often cooked breakfast, ate, and was already settled in the cockpit when she stumbled out of her room. This was fine, because it meant that by the time I’d figured out what the day’s course would be—avoiding suns and swinging around the edges of gravity wells for extra speed—she was just getting down to the engine room, ready to help pull us out of FTL. Usually by the time those adjustments were made and we were back at speed, we were both starving. Ruea usually cooked—she was better at it, because she remembered to actually add vegetables—and we’d eat together. Ruea would spend the afternoon in the engine room, maintaining our marginal little ship, while I did whatever tasks needed to be done: pouring fuel into the tank, replenishing the water supply, and scrubbing rust off the door tracks to make the doors open smoother. We’d eat dinner, maybe play card games or watch whatever old movies were on the ship’s computer, and go to sleep.

Sometimes, I caught myself staring at Ruea while she worked at the engine or the stove. When she was concentrating on something, her eyes would go soft, and she’d lean her whole body forward (which could be dangerous when she was working with boiling water). I could tell I was laughing too loudly when she made jokes and turning pink whenever our hands met, but I chose to ignore it. I wasn’t an idiot. I knew when I had a crush. But crewmate relationships are always disasters. I’d been in a few—they hurt your focus while you’re in them, and make things incredibly unpleasant when you break up. And since we were the only two people on the ship, I really couldn’t afford to have her mad at me.

And it wasn't like there was any chance Ruea was into me. She was easily flustered most of the time, but when she was close to me, she always seemed extra collected. Not everyone is even attracted to women, or to people outside their species for that matter, so as hot as I am, the odds were against me. I planned to keep my mouth shut.

This went on for a little over a week, until I made an unpleasant discovery. "Ruea!" I called.

"Yes?" Her voice floated up from the engine room.

"We're running out of water! There's only like three containers left."

Ruea's head popped out of the trapdoor. "Shit."

"Yeah. Didn't you say it was going to last us like half the trip?"

"It should have. The recycler must be more inefficient than I thought."

"It *has* been kind of humid lately."

Ruea sighed. "I'll try to fix it, but in the meantime, we need to fill up. Are there any planets with water nearby?"

"Let's find out." I made my way back to the cockpit and slid into the navigator's chair. Ruea sat down beside me. I swiped through screens, from the general schematic to planet profiles. "Less than a day's journey," I said, tapping on filters. "Has water. Uninhabited. Breathable atmosphere."

Ruea cut in. "Oo, it's pretty!"

The nav computer showed a rotating image of a lovely little blue planet, dotted with green and brown landmasses. It was smaller than Earth's moon, with no ice caps. It seemed odd to me that such a charming place wouldn't have been claimed by someone, but then,

there were no large civilizations nearby. We were still closer to the Crusteans than anyone else, and they weren't too big on colonization.

"Sounds good to me" said Ruea. "Let's go!"

I switched chairs. "Can you read those coordinates out to me?"

Ruea did, and I changed course to match.

"Two hours or so till we get there," I told her.

"I'll make sure the landing gear's in place!" She rose to leave, tapping my head affectionately as she went out. I was glad she was facing the other way and didn't see my whole face turn pink.

The planet was even prettier in person. I couldn't stop the smile spreading across my face when I saw it. It was so *green*! Crustea had beauty, sure, but everything is covered in these salt deposits, so from space all the natural land looks white. This place seemed to glow with life. Even the water glittered with patches of green algae.

I tapped on the comm. "Come up here!" I told Ruea. "You'll want to see this."

I scanned the surface for a patch of land large enough to land on and near enough to water to be convenient. The best one seemed to be a wide peninsula on the coast of a continent in the northern hemisphere. I'd just locked in the more specific coordinates when Ruea appeared in the doorway.

"That *is* beautiful," she said, sliding into a chair. She leaned forward, looking out the window with the same gentle intensity she had while she worked on the engine. The blue-green reflected in her glassy black eyes.

I cleared my throat. “You may want to strap yourself in,” I told her. “We’re about to breach atmo.”

Ruea buckled herself into the copilot seat just in time. The Roadblock began to quiver as it entered the little planet’s atmosphere. Then, it jerked to the side, hard. I grabbed the dashboard to steady myself.

“What was that?” Ruea’s voice came out a squeak.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Atmospheric turbulence, maybe, but I’ve never hit turbulence that hard.” I shuffled through my readouts, trying to find the problem.

The ship jerked again, even harder this time. An alarm started going off.

I cursed and grabbed hold of the wheel. The ship spiraled wildly to the side. “Someone’s firing at us!”

“What? But the map said it was uninhabited!”

“The map was wrong!”

The ship rocked again. The sound of cracking echoed up from somewhere below me, and sparks flew from the panels on the back wall.

“Ruea, rewire whatever just broke!”

I heard a series of weird clicking noises. I looked over at Ruea. She was gripping her seatbelt, her eyes wide. Her mouth was moving, but nothing I could recognize was coming out of it.

“God, the Universal Translator!” I unstrapped myself and tripped across the trembling floor to the Translator’s control panel. The wires had burst apart. Some of them were still smoking. I cursed again, slamming my fist against the wall.

Ruea hadn't moved since I stood up. She was still talking, rapidly now, but I couldn't understand any of it. I took her hand and looked her in the eyes. She stared back at me. Her hand was trembling worse than the ship.

"Listen to me," I said. "I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. But we can make it through this together. You've just got to help me. I need you to get up and start fixing the controls."

She shook her head, her gaze blank. Of course she didn't understand. My words were as alien to her as hers were to me. I needed to do something, something to show her that I was with her, that I believed in her, that everything was going to be okay.

Then, I had a stupid idea. Even in the moment, I knew it was stupid, but I couldn't think of anything else. I held Ruea by the shoulders, pushed every thought from my mind, and pressed my mouth to hers. She went even stiffer, and my brain started to work again. Crustceans don't have lips. Ruea probably had no idea what I was trying to do. But a split second later, she relaxed and leaned in closer to me, pressing her forehead against mine.

The alarm blared again, and we jumped into action. I dropped back into my chair and yanked up on the wheel. We were headed into the ground nose first. The blast had knocked out our front thruster, and all that pretty green was rushing towards us at a sickening rate. I tried to even us out a bit, but there wasn't much I could do.

Meanwhile, Ruea pulled panels from the wall, twisting wires together and apart. I didn't know what any of it meant, but it must have done something, because the thruster sputtered to life. It wasn't at full power, but I was able to change the angle of our decent at least a little.

We slammed into the ground. Dirt sprayed up and around the windows, blinding me. The ship shook so hard I half-expected the walls to fall over. I hung onto the dashboard until we finally skidded to a stop.

When everything outside got quiet, I let myself collapse back in my chair, panting. Ruea plunked down beside me. She said something unintelligible, and then immediately jumped back to her feet.

As Ruea mended whatever she was mending, I shut my eyes and let my body sink deeper into the chair. My hands felt heavy, and I was trembling to my core. I tried to slow my breathing, waiting for my heart rate to return to normal.

I heard a popping sound, followed by a weird electrical hiss. “Can you understand me now?” asked Ruea

“You fixed the Translator!” I sat straight up and turned in my chair to face her, beaming.

She nodded. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I ran my fingers through my hair, suddenly awkward. “What about you?”

“I’m not hurt.”

“So, um.” I tried not to look at her. “I guess Crustians don’t kiss.”

Ruea let out a quiet laugh. “No, we don’t.”

“Right. Um, sorry. I guess we should go outside, see how bad the damage is?”

“Naomi—”

“I’m sorry. I just...” I stood up and headed for the cockpit door.

Ruea followed me outside, saying nothing.

The terrain was lovely. Tree covered mountains soared into the cloudless blue sky. Greenish light beamed from a sun that looked just minutes from setting. We’d landed in a



massive grassy field, next to a small lake that sparkled in the sunlight. The only thing that marred the landscape was the half-mile-long wound the Roadblock had left in the grass.

There were a few black splashes on the ship's hull where she'd been hit by the still-mysterious laser bolts, but none of them had broken through. The crash had done the ship worse than the bolts had, actually. A lot of the plating on the front of the hull had crunched up, and the forward thruster had left bits and pieces of itself all along the field.

I made to pick them up, but Ruea shook her head. "Some of those bits are sensitive, and I don't want you to burn yourself. Besides, if you get too far out of the translator bubble, we won't be able to talk."

"Okay, Queen Mechanic. What do you want me to do?"

"I need you to work on the paneling. Just cut off the parts that are crunched up. You know how to use a laser-cutter, right?"

"Of course."

"Then hop to it!" She gave a clap like she was excited to get started, but when she looked back up at the ship, her antennae began to droop.

I slipped my hand into hers. "The Roadblock'll be okay," I said. "She has you."

Ruea smiled gently, but didn't reply.

"A-hem," came a voice from behind us.

I whirled. The voice came from a man—a terran—in his late sixties or early seventies, with light skin and very little hair. He wore a neatly pressed suit and carried a silver-tipped cane. Behind him floated a slick red hovercar.

"Excuse me for interrupting you ladies, but what exactly are you doing on my property?"

I scrambled to my feet, brushing grass from my legs. “We’re sorry, sir. We crashed here. Something shot us up in the atmosphere, and we didn’t have much choice.”

The old man chuckled. “Ah, yes, that would have been one of my sentry probes. Can’t have uninvited guests dropping in on my planet.”

“*Your* planet?” Ruea asked, joining me.

“Indeed. I own it.”

“Our maps said it was unoccupied,” I said.

“They’re a little out of date,” said Ruea apologetically.

The old man considered this. “I suppose I did purchase this planet fairly recently. It might not have gotten into all the databases yet. You’re forgiven.”

“Um, thank you,” I said.

“Why don’t you come back to the manor with me? You both must be famished. I’ll have the help tow your ship back for you.”

Ruea said, “That would be very kind.”

“It’s no trouble at all.” The man opened the back door of his hovercar and held it for us. I felt pretty awkward about the whole thing—we were covered in engine grease and grass stains, and his seats felt like real leather—but I learned long ago that if someone offers you free food, you take it. If there are strings attached, you cut them later.”

“The name is Rochester, by the way,” the man called over the noise of his engine.

“Hindley Rochester, at your service.”

“I’m Naomi Mandelbaum,” I shouted back, “and this is Ruea.”

“No last name?”

Ruea said, “Crustians don’t have last names.”

“How peculiar.”

Hindley Rochester lived in an honest-to-God manor. It looked like something out of a British period drama—you half expected to see a waif in an empire-waisted dress come running toward it off the moors. The house was four stories tall, with towers that added a fifth and sixth story. It sprawled across the lawn as though it had been built wing-by-wing over the course of centuries, although I would have been surprised if it’d been up for more than a year.

The whole beautiful monstrosity sat on a hilltop, surrounded by perfectly manicured gardens. Almost all the flowers I saw were from earth, which struck me as odd. Why line your walk with rose bushes and buttercups when you could have thorsinelles? Still, everything was in bloom, and the scent was intoxicating. Just not as intoxicating as a thorsinelle vine would have been.

I saw something brown move out of the corner of my eye, and laughed aloud. The man had brought squirrels halfway across the galaxy, just for his garden!

“Do you know what those are, young lady?” asked Rochester.

“Sure,” I said, “I’ve seen a squirrel before.”

“Good. Too many humans of your generation have lost connection with their roots. My granddaughter’s never even been to earth! Eighteen years old and still running with heathens on Cheakso.”

“Cheakso’s a pretty nice planet,” I said. “If you’ve got to be off Earth, you might as well live somewhere with two sunsets a day.”

“I suppose so,” said Rochester, but he didn’t sound convinced.

Ruea leaned closer to me. “Humans?” she whispered.

“Antiquated term for terrans,” I whispered back. “He’s old enough to get away with it.”

“I heard that,” Rochester said. “You one of those people who calls themselves a terran?”

“I am.”

“I don’t hold with that. Makes it sound like we’re aliens.”

“Well sir, out here, we are.”

“Not on this planet,” said Rochester proudly. “Before I got here, there was no life, so I brought my own. This is a human world.” He parked the hovercar outside the manor door.

“Come on in. Supper’s in half an hour.”

The manor was as grand inside as out. The walls were covered in dark red velvet and hung with replications of famous terran paintings. Huge windows let in the last dregs of the afternoon sunlight. The floor was wooden and shiny, though most of it was covered by elaborate rugs, and two crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceiling.

Ruea said, “Your home is beautiful.”

“Thank you,” said Rochester. “I’ve taken great pains to keep it in this condition.” He beckoned us into the entry hall. “Let me show you where you’ll be staying. You can get freshened up before we eat.”

We followed him through richly decorated hallways and up two flights of winding stairs. The man was clearly an old-earth enthusiast. Most of his furnishings were replicas of priceless earth items—renaissance paintings, Japanese vases, post-contemporary statues. A few were real, and he made sure to point them out.

Finally, he stopped in front of a dark wooden door. “This is yours.”

The bedroom inside was lovely, with lilac carpeting and cream-colored walls. There was only one problem.

“There’s only one bed,” said Ruea.

“I doubt you’ll be needing more than one,” Rochester said with a smile. “See you downstairs.” And closed the door behind him with a snap.

Ruea and I didn’t meet each other’s eyes. Her cheeks were purple, and mine were probably a bit pink.

When I spoke, it was determinately not about the bed. “I wonder if there’s a bathtub. It’s been forever since I’ve taken a bath.”

Like everywhere else in the manor, the ensuite bathroom was beautifully furnished, with a claw-foot tub and a thoroughly modern toilet. We cleaned off quickly, and then set off for the dining room.

It took us all of fifteen minutes to find the it, even though it was the largest room in the house. The table could easily have fit fifty people, and there was considerable room left around it. The ceiling was so high I could barely see it, and the air was cold.

Rochester was sitting at the far end of the table, but stood when we entered. “How do you like your room?” he asked, once we were in earshot.

“It’s lovely,” Ruea said.

Rochester gave her a tight-lipped smile and looked over at me. “I trust you also found it comfortable?”

“I did,” I said, “and now I’m starving. What are we having?”

“Roast beef,” Rochester said. “I raise my own cattle.” He picked up a little brass bell on the table and shook it.

A red-headed Terran boy, who only looked to be fourteen, entered through a side door carrying a tray that was almost as large as he was. He set it on the table and removed three plates, setting one before each of us without a word, and without meeting anyone's eyes. It was weird to be served like this in a private home, but I imagined if you were as obviously rich as Rochester, you could get away with it. Before the boy could disappear through the door again, I said, "Thank you! And tell the cook thank you, too."

The boy smiled wanly and left.

Nobody spoke for the next few minutes. Ruea and I, at least, were too busy eating to make conversation. What a luxury to eat food that hadn't been frozen for months! The roast beef was tender and topped with rich brown gravy. Beside it there were greens and carrots cooked soft, white yeasty rolls, and a lump of creamy mashed potatoes. There was wine, too, a rich red. When we finished that, the same boy brought us dishes of ice cream—made in his own kitchen, Rochester assured us—topped with baked apples. It was the most Earthy meal I'd ever eaten, including several on the planet itself. There was not an off-world spice or leaf anywhere on the table, which also struck me as odd.

Rochester watched us eat with pride. When we finished, he turned his gaze on me. "How long do you plan to stay?"

"Um, I'm not sure." I glanced over at Ruea.

"Just until we can get our ship fixed," she said. "And if we can siphon some water from one of your lakes, that'd be good, too."

"Excellent. Then be sure to be on time for breakfast tomorrow. We're having lobster!"

Ruea fiddled with her spoon. “Um, I don’t know if I’d be comfortable with that. I’ve been told that Terran lobsters have similar anatomy to Crusteans, and I’m not sure if I could eat something that looked like me.”

Rochester raised his eyebrows. “Of course, my dear, I’d never expect you to do a thing like that! I know all about Crustean anatomy, and you’re right to see the similarity.”

“Thank you sir—”

“That’s why you’re on the menu.”

I choked on my wine. “What did you say?”

Rochester showed no sign that he was kidding. “I said we’ll be eating her. I assumed you knew. I only gave you a bedroom for one, after all.”

Ruea’s antennae were crinkled. “I don’t understand.”

Rochester chuckled. “It’s quite simple, my dear. You will be brought to the kitchens, where you will be boiled, filleted, and served with lemon.”

My carrots were threatening to make a reappearance. I looked over at Ruea. “I think he’s serious.”

The old man looked from one shocked face to the other. “Come now, children, you didn’t think I’d let an alien onto my planet as a *guest*? I thought I made my feelings about such things quite clear.”

Ruea made a break for the door. I was steps behind her. There was the sound of a bell, and then the doors burst open and half a dozen burly Terran men poured in. We were almost to the end of the table when they grabbed us. One took each of my arms, and a third lifted me

off the ground before I could react. I squirmed and kicked, but they didn't even flinch.

Across the table, Ruea was doing the same, with little success.

Rochester slowly walked the length of the table and put his hand on my arm. "Are you certain you won't dine with me tomorrow? The alien will make a delicious meal. I've had her kind before. Very tender."

I spat on him.

He scowled. "I suggest you adjust your attitude, young lady. Until do, I think I ought to put you somewhere safe. Gentlemen, take her to the dungeon."

They nodded and obeyed, not even noticing my struggles. Ruea reached out to me and I tried to reach back. "I'll rescue you!" I called, "I swear I will!"

"No she won't," said Rochester, and then the door shut with a snap, and Ruea was gone.

It was some small comfort that the "dungeon" wasn't from the same era as the rest of the house. It was a modern, sterile facility that looked like it belonged in a police station, not the basement of a madman's manor house. The place was blindingly white, and held three empty cells. I was tossed into one. The force field was up before I could even get to my feet. The men left without so much as looking at me.

I pressed myself against the force field. Sometimes, cheap ones have cracks around the edges or weaknesses in the center. This one was not cheap. I pushed and pushed until the buzzing of the field passed into my fingers and up to my elbows. Nothing. I hammered on the walls and looked for weaknesses in the floor and ceiling. Nothing. The padded bench and the steel toilet and sink were bolted to the wall. I tried to remove them. Nothing. Finally, I sunk to the floor of the cell and cried.



Ruea was probably dead, and it was my fault. I should have just stayed on Crustea, gotten a job frying pomadros. Or better yet, I should have stayed on Mars, gotten over my adolescent rebellion, and gone to university. That was the smart thing to do. But no, I had to run away. It was just like me, to finally meet the perfect girl and then get her killed.

I lay there on the floor and, for the first time since I was thirteen, I prayed. I figured at this point, it couldn't hurt. I pressed my eyes closed and said the one prayer I still remembered in its entirety.

*“Shema Yisrael, Adonai elohainu, Adonai echad.*

*Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam vaed.”*

“Are you Jewish?”

I sat bolt upright, startled. A redheaded boy, the same one who had served us lunch maybe two hours earlier, was standing by the edge of the force field, watching me. “I heard you praying,” he said, by way of explanation.

“I am,” I said. My voice was quiet and horse from crying.

“My mother was Jewish,” said the boy. “She died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m supposed to bring you this food,” he said, holding out a covered plastic plate.

I rolled my eyes. “Is there anything sentient in it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Then I noticed that his hands were shaking, and his eyes kept flicking down to the dish like it was made of gold. “You know what, kid?” I said. “I’m not really that hungry. I mean, I just ate a little bit ago. Do you want to have my food?”

His eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

He let out a loud, shaky breath and dropped to the floor, prying the cover from the plate and shoveling leftover mashed potatoes into his mouth with his fingers.

“Shit,” I said, “does Rochester not feed you guys?”

“He does,” said the boy, not looking up from his food, “but not enough.”

“I guess you’re a teenager, too. When my brother was your age he never stopped eating.” Thinking about Josh sent another twinge of sadness and guilt through me, so I stopped talking. The boy didn’t say anything either. His face was practically buried in the plate.

When the food was gone, the boy sat back on his heels with a sigh. He glanced at the door, then whispered, “Want me to let you out?”

I scrambled to my feet. “Yes!”

He pressed something on a panel by the door to my cell. There was a shimmer in the air, and then the force field faded away.

“It won’t be long until someone notices you’re gone,” he told me. “He likes to eat fresh, so your friend is probably still alive, in the kitchens. But hurry!”

“Thank you,” I said.

The boy scurried to the door, glancing around like someone could see him from here.

“Wait!” I called, “What’s your name?”

He paused. “Elijah.”

“Well, Elijah, how do I get to the kitchens?”

But he was already gone.

I crept through the hall outside the dungeon as quietly as I could. From what I knew of the kind of house this place was based on, the kitchen was probably on one of the lower floors, but I had no way of knowing if they were above or below me. I was in the lower part of the manor, for sure, but the elevator the men had taken me down had only one button on it. It could take me hours to find the kitchen, and I didn't even know for sure if that was where Ruea was being held.

There was a computer terminal in the hallway. I tried to access it, but it wanted me to input a password. I pressed the "I forgot my password" button, and it told me to swipe and employee ID card. I hit the computer keys in frustration. The words "Password Invalid" popped up on the screen. I groaned and stalked away.

Around the next bend, I found a row of doors locked with simple keyholes, no encryption. Thank God. I picked the first one and found myself in what must have been a staff bedroom. It was small and barely more furnished than my cell had been, but the woman who lived there had put up art on the walls and covered the bed with a cheerful quilt. Maybe if I stole a uniform from her, I could even play myself off as a new recruit and openly ask for directions. She was quite a bit larger than me, but I belted the waist tightly and it didn't look too absurd. Then I got back to searching.

It was a quarter of an hour before I saw anyone. I turned a corner and saw a young man, Terran of course, walking away from me. I scrambled after him.

"Excuse me! Sorry, I'm new. I'm supposed to deliver a message to the kitchens, but I must have gotten turned around. Can you help me?"

The man glanced over at me. "New? We're not expecting any new help until—" He saw my face and stopped dead. "You're her," he said, barely audible. The color drained from his

face, and he took a step back. “How did you get out? N-nevermind. I didn’t see you, and you didn’t see me, okay?” And he took off down the hall.

So much for that plan. I kept walking. The uniform at least made me inconspicuous at a distance. I told myself I’d figure out another plan soon, but there was a little twinge of panic growing in my stomach. It had to be past two in the morning, maybe even past four, and Ruea was running out of time.

Then, I noticed something strange. There were small doors in the middle of the walls, at about the height of my chest, spread out at five foot intervals. I’d never seen anything like them before. I tried pulling on one. It opened easily, showing what appeared to be a tiny elevator shaft. Metal chords hung on either side. I gave one of them an experimental tug, and something above me creaked downwards. I pulled it the rest of the way down. It was a metal platform, just large enough to fit a medium sized dog. Why someone would need a dog-elevator, I couldn’t guess.

A woman rounded the corner, and I jumped, turning to face the wall and praying she wouldn’t look at me too closely. She wore the same uniform as I did, but her shirt was untucked. She carried a stack of dirty dishes, which she placed on one of the elevators. She pulled on the cord inside the shaft a few times, and then she closed the little door and walked away, not even sparing me a second glance.

My mind raced. If the elevators carried dishes, it wasn’t crazy to assume that they led to the kitchens. It seemed like the kind of old fashioned thing Rochester would build into his house. I had no guarantee that I was right—for all I knew, the shaft led to the incinerator—but it was the closest thing to a lead I’d gotten all night.

I hoisted myself into the shaft head first. The platform didn't break and the shaft was just barely wide enough to fit my shoulders if I stood diagonally and kept my elbows tucked in tight. There was no dust, at least. Rochester kept everything clean. I took hold of the cord and began to pull. There wasn't actually enough room for my fingers to hold the cord, so my knuckles scraped against the wall when I tugged. I gritted my teeth and did it again.

I inched up the shaft. It was harder to pull with my weight on it, though luckily there was some mechanism that kept the whole thing from just slamming into the ground every time I paused. Once the platform passes the top of the door, the shaft was pitch black and stuffy. My knuckles started to bleed at some point, but I ignored them. My arms burned, and my shoulders cramped up. *Ruea needs me*, I told myself over and over again. *She's alive and she needs my help. I have to keep going.*

And I did. I pulled and pulled in the blackness, hoping that the kitchens were only one floor up. I was slow to begin with, and I got slower as the pain in my arms and hands mounted. Soon, even my legs began to ache from being squashed in the same position for so long. My fingers shook. I didn't let myself think about tetanus or the risk of infection. Just Ruea. Only Ruea.

Finally, a sliver of light appeared above me. I let out a gasp that was almost a sob. It was no more than a crack under the door, but it looked to me like liquid silver floating in the air. I pulled myself toward it with renewed vigor, biting back the pain in my hands. I pushed open the door as soon as my fingertips could reach it. Light spilled over me like warm water, and I pulled in huge gasps of fresh air. Two more feet, and I tumbled out of the shaft and onto the floor, clutching my hands. I lay there for just a moment, and then made myself sit up and look around.

I was in a hallway which was, mercifully, empty. One wall was lined with the little elevators, more than a dozen of them. At one end was a pair of double doors that I hoped led to a kitchen. At the other end was a glass door leading out into the garden. The barest hints of dawn were visible over the trees. Had I really been at this all night? By the door were a pair of heavy work boots and a shovel, abandoned by some gardener. I took the shovel.

I opened the double doors a tiny crack and peeked through. What I saw was a bizarre cross between a kitchen and an operating room. The walls were lined with ovens and refrigerators, but also surgical equipment. Bright, movable lights hung from the ceiling, reflecting off the chrome surfaces of the room. It was enough to give me a headache, especially after the darkness of the shaft. The room was dominated by a huge metal table, upon which was a body.

Ruea lay very still, a white sheet over most of her. It didn't cover her face, though, so maybe she was still alive. They would cover her face if she were dead, right? I glanced around, and then opened the doors and rushed to her side. I made to touch her, but hesitated at the last second. What if she was dead? What if I was too late?

I didn't get the chance to find out. The doors opened, and I ducked into a closet before the newcomer could see me. The closet, I realized moments later, was in fact the kitchen's cold storage. The hair stood up on my arms and I shivered. I wrapped my arms around myself and pushed the door open the tiniest crack, as much to feel the warmth as to eavesdrop.

Rochester paced in and out of my view. He was humming to himself as he puttered around the kitchen. I couldn't see much of what he was doing, but it seemed to involve a lot

of opening and closing of cabinets. There was the popping sound of a bottle being uncorked, a weird fleshy noise I couldn't place, and then a sudden, tremendous rattling.

"Let me go!" Ruea shouted. It was unmistakably her voice, high and strong. I nearly fainted with relief.

Rochester continued to hum.

"I have people who will come looking for me! Don't think you can get away with this!"

I smiled despite myself.

Rochester snorted. "They all say that. But nobody ever comes. You know why? Because you're all dumb animals. A lobster that thinks it's a person! Nobody's coming to save you."

I burst out of the freezer. "That's where you're wrong, old man," I said, and swung.

The head of the shovel hit Rochester in the ribs. He crumpled to the floor. "H-how did you escape?" he said, his voice knotted in pain.

I ignored him, rushing to the table. "Ruea, are you okay?" I ran my fingers along her cheek.

"I think so," she said. Her eyes shone, looking up at me. "I'm dizzy but I'm alive. Gods, Naomi, I thought I'd never see you again!"

"Me too," I said. "Can you stand?"

"No," she said, rattling her wrists. It was only then that I noticed the cuffs chaining her to the table by the wrists and ankles.

"Right. I'll get you out."

"No—you won't."

I whirled around. Rochester had somehow managed to stand up and was leaning against the wall, gripping his side. He reached out toward a wall panel, his fingers searching for the panic button.

I shouldered the shovel.

“Naomi, don’t!” said Ruea from behind me.

I swung.

It connected with a sickening crack. He dropped to the floor, blood pouring from the wound in his scalp, and he didn’t get up.

“You killed him,” Ruea said. “Stars, you actually killed him. I don’t believe it.” She was crying now, and the sound tore at my heart.

“It was him or us. Let’s get out of here,” I said. I turned to her and raised the shovel, and she screamed.

I let out an impatient breath. “I’m not going to hurt you, Ruea. I just need to break the chains.”

“No,” she said. “You killed him. You—you *killed* him.”

“He was going to kill us,” I said, as gently as I could manage. “I did what I had to do. Please let me break your chains.” I took another step towards her, but she shrank back. I groaned. “Ruea, we don’t have time for this! The guards’ll be here any minute. We have to get out.”

Her eyes were overflowing with horror. “I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m the person who’s going to get your ungrateful ass out of here alive,” I said, and swung the shovel. She screamed again, but the chain holding her left foot to the table shattered. “See? I’m not going to hurt you.”



Ruea just whimpered.

She didn't protest while I broke the rest of the chains. Seeing her like that, crumpled and frightened, tied my stomach in knots of guilt the way the old man still oozing on the floor never could. Why couldn't she understand that I was saving her life? Rochester was scum. The galaxy was better off without him. It's not like I'd killed him for fun. Why couldn't she just be grateful?

I brought the shovel down on the last chain harder than I meant to, making myself jump. "Sorry," I muttered, and cast the shovel on the floor. "Can you sit up?"

Ruea didn't respond. She lay with her eyes fixed on the ceiling, trembling.

"Ruea," I said, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice, "I need you to be strong, okay? I need you to get up."

Ruea nodded, although she still didn't look at me, and propped herself up on her elbows.

"There you go." I felt foolish, coaxing her like she was a little kid, but it seemed to be what she needed right now. The first time I'd seen someone get shot, I'd been all scared and trembly, too. In fact, I'd vomited all over the pirate captain I'd been working for. At least Ruea's stomach seemed contained. "Can you stand? Or are you still too dizzy?"

Ruea slid off the table and stumbled. I caught her around the waist.

"You're okay. You got this."

She clung to my shoulders, but she still wouldn't look at me. She kept her eyes on her bare feet.

"Let's head for the door, okay? We can find the Roadblock from there."

Ruea nodded and began to shuffle along with me.

We were halfway across the room when the door swung open to reveal a young man, his arms full of fresh vegetables. He froze for a moment, taking in the scene—Rochester’s bloody body, the discarded shovel, Ruea clinging to my shoulders—and then he burst out laughing.

I stared at him, barely comprehending, as he dropped the vegetables and clutched his stomach, almost wheezing with laughter. “Jesus Christ,” he said when he could speak.

“Corrine is going to be *furious*! She’s been stockpiling weapons for *months*! Oh my God.”

Ruea glanced at me, confused, and I shot her an equally befuddled look in return. Inside, I was overjoyed to see her look at me with something other than fear or hatred, but I tried not to let it show on my face.

“How can you laugh?” Ruea seemed recovered enough to be angry. “A man is *dead*!”

“You have no idea,” the man said. “A group of us have been planning to lead a coup against him for ages. We had a date picked out and everything. And then you two randomers come in and kill him without even hardly trying!”

That was kind of funny, so I laughed, too. “Sorry, I guess.”

The man flapped his hand. “It’s fine. I mean, it doesn’t matter how he died, so long as he did.” He glanced over his shoulder, and then added, “Of course, not everyone sees it that way. Some folks here were actually loyal to him, and others wanted a chance to see him suffer. You should get out of here before everyone finds out.”

“Our ship—” I said, but he cut me off.

“Rochester had some of the engineers work on it. My friend told me everyone went crazy over it—its not often that they get to play in a nice vintage ship, apparently. I bet it’s ready.”

Ruea said, “We need water,” in a distant sort of voice, like she couldn’t remember *why* we needed water anymore.

The man nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. Come with me.”

We followed him out into the garden. The sun was up now, but there was still a bit of chill in the air. The chirping and the heavy scent of roses wafted through the air. If it weren’t for the circumstances, it would be a beautiful morning.

“My name is Andy, by the way,” the man called over his shoulder.

“I’m Naomi.”

“I know. We all know who you are. We don’t get a lot of visitors—”

“Can’t imagine why,” Ruea muttered.

“—So you two were hot gossip.” He led us out of the manicured part of the garden and into a green field lined with what looked like airplane hangers. “My friend works over here. She’ll help you find the ship. I’m not an engineer, so I don’t know where it is.” He banged on the corrugated metal door, and a moment later, a young woman—Terran, of course—shoved it upward. “Corinne!”

“Andy! Hey! Who are these people?” The woman wiped grease and sweat from her forehead with a dirty cloth.

Andy told her who we were and what we’d done. She didn’t laugh when he finished, but she didn’t shout at us either. She just shook her head.

“Andy’s right,” she told us, “you need to get out of here. Your ship is basically ready. One of you’s an engineer?”

Ruea lifted her hand.

“You can help me finish it up. Come on.”

“I’ll see about water,” Andy said, setting back off towards the house.

“Thanks!” I called after him.

Ruea and I followed Corrine to another hanger. I sped up a bit so I was walking beside the other woman.

“I’m sorry we messed up your revolution,” I said.

She sighed. “It’s okay. I’m glad you didn’t die. I just hope...”

“What?”

“There are going to be consequences. I’d counted on having more time to soften them. Now I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“We could stay, try and fix things.”

Corrine smiled, but shook her head. “That’s kind, but it won’t help. You’re another variable. I don’t want to endanger you, or anyone else.”

We’d arrived at the hanger. Corrine unlocked the door. Behind it was the Roadblock, looking as beautiful as I’d ever seen her. Her crumpled up plating had been replaced with shiny new panels, and the rest of her had been lovingly buffed.

“She’s almost in working order,” Corrine said. “We were having trouble with the alignment on the front thruster, think you could help us out?”

“Yeah, I can,” said Ruea. Her voice was flat and quiet, but at least she was talking.

“I’ll just go, um, check the controls then.” I left the engineers standing in the hanger, and went to go hide in my cockpit. There was nothing for me to check. I just didn’t want to be in the way.

Soon after, Andy and some other sympathetic ex-servants came by with several containers of water. It wasn't as much as we'd left Crustea with, but I thanked him all the same.

Finally, the ship was fixed and reloaded. Ruea stood with me in the cockpit, still oddly silent, as we watched the planet fade from view. I reached for her hand.

"Please don't," she said.

"Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. Just, your hands—all I can see is you killing him."

"Ruea, he was going to eat you!"

"I know."

"Even if we'd escaped and I left him alive, he would have killed countless other people. You heard what he said."

"I *know*. And maybe—maybe it was even the right thing to do. But I just can't—you can't touch me."

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I tried to ignore them "Ruea—"

"I'm *sorry*, Naomi. We can—we can still be friends, I think. I just can't—" She paused, stars reflecting in her glassy black eyes. "I'm sorry," she said again, quieter this time, and then turned and walked out the door.

I felt like crying, but I couldn't. My chest felt hollow. I rubbed my fingers against my still-gaping knuckles, trying to block out my heart with physical pain.

I avoided Ruea for a solid twenty-four hours after that. At first, it was because I was too sore to move, and falling asleep at the helm didn't help me much. When I got hungry, I

pilfered the cache of snacks I keep under the dashboard. But when I eventually did feel strong enough to stand, I didn't want to. I didn't want to look at Ruea and see hurt in her eyes, or even worse, see no pain at all. So I hid.

But eventually I ran out of snack food. When I ventured out into the kitchen, Ruea was sitting at the table, running her fingers over the edge. She didn't say anything to me as I rehydrated one of the dinners. I considered taking it back into the cockpit and eating it there, but it seemed mean. So, I sat down across from Ruea and started eating. I figured that if she wanted to talk, she would.

And she did. "How mad are you?" she asked.

"I'm not mad," I said. "You have childhood trauma and stuff. You're entitled to feel the way you feel."

"Thank you," she said, looking down at her lap.

"But I'm also entitled to feel the way I feel. And I am kind of hurt. There are only a few things worth killing for, and you're one of them."

"Please don't say that."

"I'm sorry. I'll stop. But it's true." I tried to smile at her, but my face wouldn't work. "I care about you a lot."

"You too." Ruea finally looked up, ducking her head a bit in a sheepish smile.

Part 4

I did what I could to put the whole kiss and rejection debacle behind me. I continued to catch myself staring at Ruea, of course—a crush like that doesn’t just disappear overnight—but I didn’t say anything about it, and neither did she. As the days ticked slowly on and we returned to our routine, it became easier and easier to bear. She even started to touch me again, just casually, without flinching. Ruea was still my friend, and I tried to make myself believe that was all that mattered. I almost succeeded, too.

One morning, I was making hot cereal, and Ruea was bent over a huge mug of tea, almost awake. I ladled the cereal into two bowls and was just turning to set them on the table when a hideous screeching sound filled the ship. I jumped, spilling cereal down my shirt, and cursed. Ruea clamped her hands over her antennae.

“What the hell is that?” She shouted.

I set down the bowls and dashed to the cockpit. The hazard lights were grey and cold, and the nav system wasn’t registering any objects in our path. “I don’t know,” I called, though I wasn’t sure Ruea could hear me over the ear-rending noise. Then I noticed a blinking yellow light in the far corner of the dashboard, labeled “distress beacon.”

There was a switch under the light. I flipped it, and the sound stopped, though the light continued to flash. I collapsed into the copilot seat. “I guess we know what the distress signal sounds like now,” I called.

Ruea peeked her head around the door. “Where’s it coming from?”

“Good question.” I leaned forward and enlarged the nav screen. In the corner was a small yellow dot, a color I’d never seen it display before. “I bet that’s it.”

“Are we going to help them?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we?”



Ruea looked uncomfortable, but she didn't say anything.

I felt a twinge of resentment. Just because I killed one crazy murderer didn't make me heartless. "You think I'd just leave them to die? What the hell do you take me for?"

"That's not what I meant."

I crossed my arms. "What do you mean, then?"

"It's just, they're so far out of our way, and I wasn't sure that you—"

"If we can help them, then we have an obligation to."

Ruea looked down. "It's just, we don't know what's out there. We don't know what we'll find."

I froze. I'd completely misread the situation. "Ruea, are you... scared?"

"Aren't you? I've heard of pirates and fleshdealers faking distress calls to lure people in, and then..."

"Hey," I stood and put my hands on her shoulders. "Nothing like that is going to happen. They've probably just busted their engine. We help them out with repairs, and then be on our way."

Ruea shut her eyes and curled her antennae. "You're right. They need our help."

I let go of her and made myself sound jaunty. "Alright! Let's get turned around."

Two hours later, we pulled out of FTL. The stars snapped back into focus, and there, just off our starboard side, was the ship. It was gray and cylindrical, the kind of ship that only docks at space stations and never sets down on a planet. It was rotating slowly in the vacuum, perpendicular to us. There were no signs of damage on the hull, but it was clearly drifting.

There was something about the way it was tilted that made it look wrong, like a broken wrist.

“See?” I said to Ruea. “No pirates.”

She shrugged.

I pulled out the long-distance comm and sent a signal out to the ship. “This is the Roadblock. How may we be of assistance?”

No answer.

I tried again. “We received your distress call. Do you need medical help?”

Still nothing.

“That’s weird. I wonder if their comms are down.”

“Maybe,” said Ruea.

“Can you tell what’s wrong with it?”

Ruea leaned forward. “No. The hull’s intact, the comm relays don’t look damaged, the thrusters are fine. It’s just—off. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’m going to move us a little closer.”

“Okay.” Ruea twisted her hands together, and then said, “Naomi?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you mind if I, maybe, held onto your arm?”

“That’s fine,” I said, determinedly keeping my eyes focused on the ship. “Just don’t yank the yoke or anything.”

She wrapped her pointed fingers around my bicep. It wasn’t especially comfortable, but there was still a thrill that ran through my body at the contact.

As we drew closer, I realized how much larger the ship was than us. It was easily three times as wide and five times as long—a passenger ship. Probably headed to Ys. My stomach

curdled at the thought of all the people who could be trapped on it. And yet, there was no damage. The hull was nicer than ours, the fins were smooth and whole, and the thrusters were intact.

“There’s a docking port,” said Ruea, pointing as the little rectangle turned into view.

“Standard configuration, so we should fit.”

I glanced at her. “You’re okay with boarding them, then?”

“If they can’t answer our comms, it’s the only way we can help.” But she’d gone a bit orange, the equivalent of a human turning green.

“You can stay here, if you want.”

“No, I’ll go. If they have a technical problem, you won’t be able to fix it. No offense.”

“None taken.” I steered the Roadblock so it was turning in unison with the other ship and aligned the docking ports. “Can you go set up the transfer?”

“Yes, of course.” It wasn’t until she let go of my arm that I realized how hard she’d been holding it.

The Roadblock rumbled as it connected to the other ship. I snatched up the comm. “Ruea, are we attached?”

“Yes. It’s all good here.”

I flipped through my screens until I found the one I needed. “Sensors indicate that the gravity and air composition are similar to ours, so we don’t need suits or masks or anything.”

“Good. Grab a medkit on your way down.”

“Gotcha. I’ll get one of those blasters we took from the pirates, too.”

Ruea was silent for a moment, and then said, “Good idea. Bring me one too.”

I raised my eyebrows, though of course she couldn't see it. Poor Ruea must be scared shitless if she was willing to take a blaster, or let me have one. If I were that scared, I would absolutely not be going on the other ship. I'd have turned the Roadblock around and left it to rot. But I wasn't especially scared—it was probably just some power failure. We were more likely to need screwdrivers than blasters.

“I'm on my way.”

I climbed onto the table in the galley and pulled down the medbay. I snagged one of the travel medkits, and then made my way to one of the spare bedrooms, where we'd stashed three stolen blasters from the pirates. I grabbed the two that looked like they could still fire and met Ruea at the stern of the ship.

“May I?” She held out a hand. I gave her a blaster and then stuck the other one in my belt. Ruea lifted hers experimentally.

“Do you know how to use it?” I asked.

“In theory. I've only ever shot at targets before, though.”

“Well, hopefully that won't change today. Ready?”

Ruea pointed her blaster at the door and nodded. I pressed the unlock button. Our doors slid smoothly open. The other ship's doors didn't move. I stepped forward and gave them a tug. “Stuck.”

“I'll grab a crow-mag.” Ruea said. She took black bar with a glowing magenta end from a pile of tools in the corner. “This should do it,” she said, pressing the magenta to the crack of the doors. With a grunt, she yanked it to the side. The door inched open.

We slipped inside. I went first, one hand on my hip, the other clutching the medkit. Ruea followed me.

We stepped into a darkness. Light oozed in from the Roadblock, and somewhere in front of us, a panel flashed red, but otherwise, nothing.

Ruea ran a hand along a desk to our right. She brought her fingers up to the light. “Dust.”

“Weird,” I said. “They must not use this room much.”

We turned on the lights atop our blasters. They cast narrow but bright beams into the heavy dark. With them, we could see that we were not in a room but a hallway that branched off to either side. It was lined with desks. They were all abandoned. Several of the chairs lay on their sides, with thick layers of dust covering everything.”

Ruea said, “We must be on the control level. On a ship like this, there are two layers of passengers or storage space beneath us.”

“Which way to the cockpit?” I asked.

“Right, probably.”

We made our way down the hall, blaster lights and flashing error messages our only source of illumination. All the stations were empty. There was a mug sitting at one of them. I peered inside. Flecks of green and white mold dotted the murky water.

“Ruea,” I said, “I’m starting to think that we aren’t going to find many survivors.”

“There’s still water in there though. It would have evaporated if it had been here more than a few weeks.”

I shook my head. “No way to know. Depends on their atmospheric control settings.”

Her hand slid into mine. “I don’t want to see dead people.”

“Me neither. Let’s just—let’s go to the cockpit and see if anyone’s there. If they are, we’ll help them. If they’re not, we’ll leave. Okay?”

“Okay.”

We pressed on. The air hung heavy with dust. It felt like being under a blanket, with the darkness and the heat and the stuffiness all pressing in on you. I could feel my chest getting tighter, my breaths more shallow.

Ruea jerked her beam up to the ceiling, snapping me out of my spiral. “What?” I asked, looking up.

“Nothing,” she said, staring at the bare ceiling of the corridor. “Just, in the dramas, the heroes always forget to look up.”

“At least nothing dripped on us,” I said, and Ruea shuddered. She was still holding my hand.

Finally, we reached the end of the corridor. A set of double doors stood in front of us, almost identical to the ones that led to the Roadblock’s cockpit. The green paint on them was flaking, but when I pulled on the door, it opened easily.

The cockpit was every bit as dark as the hallway. Dashboard lights shone like stars in the blackness, blotted out by the backs of three chairs: pilot, copilot, navigator. I ran my light up and down the backs of the chairs, but I didn’t see anything, until—

“What is that?” gasped Ruea, pressing behind me.

I added my light to hers, and saw what Ruea had seen: three white stubs, hanging over the arm of the navigator’s chair. Fingers. But as I looked closer, I suddenly understood: these were fingers without skin, without sinew. These were bones.

Fighting back the urge to vomit, to run, to hide behind Ruea’s tall, broad body, I inched to the side. My light fell on three skeletons, sprawled haphazardly in their chairs. Their pelvic bones were wide—almost certainly the remains of a Ysi crew. The one nearest me’s skull lolled to the side, empty eye sockets staring at me. I stumbled back.

“We should go,” I said, my voice low and thick.

Ruea nodded and turned to the door. “Naomi,” she said in a voice barely above a whisper, “was that—*trail*—there when we came in?”

“Trail?” I peered around her shoulder. On the floor, something slick cut through the dust about halfway down the corridor. In the half-light, it looked like the kind of trail a snail would leave behind, if that snail were the size of a rhinoceros. “No, that was not here before.”

“Let’s get out of here,” said Ruea, a note of panic in her voice. We sprinted down the hallway together, stumbling in our haste and fear. I jumped over the trail, but Ruea stepped in it, and fell to the ground.

“My boot is stuck,” she said. “I can’t move.”

“Take it off, I hissed. “We need to get out of here!”

Trembling, Ruea held onto my arm for balance as she unlaced her boot and pulled out of it. We kept running until we smashed into a huge metal door that had been invisible in the darkness, blocking off the hallway. We pulled on it, but it was no use. It was locked. And our ship was on the other side.

Spent, Ruea collapsed against the door. “Why did I leave the crow-mag on the ship?”

I squeezed her arm. My mind was reeling. I tried to concentrate on strategy, and not on the fact that something was alive on this ship, something that didn’t want us to leave. “You know all the makes and models of ships, right?” I asked.

“Well, not all of them, but—”

“But you know what this one is?”

Ruea nodded jerkily. “Kerima class, J-165. Probably a ’73.”

“And do you know the schematics of a ship like this?”

“Yes, mostly.”

“So theoretically, you could find another way to get to the Roadblock, right?”

Ruea took a steadying breath. “Theoretically. But...”

“But?”

“I don’t want to go deeper into the ship.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Neither do I. But what I want less is to stand here until whatever oozy thing closed the door on us comes back.”

“Okay. Okay.” Ruea shut her eyes, her antennae knotted in concentration. “You’re not going to like this,” she said.

“What?”

“The most effective way to get to the Roadblock is to... follow the slime.”

“Oh God, really?”

“Yes. The thing went down the hallway we need to take.”

“Okay,” I said, trying desperately to keep my voice steady. “Follow the slime.”

The trail left by the thing was not quite as wide as the hallway was, so there were clean strips a foot wide on either side of the trail. We pressed ourselves against opposite walls and began to pick our way forwards.

Ruea whispered, “This hall should lead to the crew quarters, and then loop back around to the docking hatch.”

“Great,” I whispered back. “How far is it?”

Ruea’s antenna twitched into a grimace. “At this pace? Far.”

“Maybe the thing turned further down the hall.”



“Maybe,” said Ruea.

The goo on the ground gave off a too-sweet scent like rotting fruit. The air was hot and thick with dust. I just hoped the artificial gravity didn’t give.

Soon, we reached the crew quarters. I was grateful for the change, since each doorway gave me a few extra inches for my feet. The hallway bent around to the left, pointing us back where we’d come, just like Ruea expected. The slime continued too, viscous and black and bubbly in some places.

Neither of us spoke for a long time. I don’t know if we could. We were weighed down too heavily with dust and fear for anything other than the next step to seem important.

Then, I saw something down the corridor. It was huge, almost the size of the hall, black and glistening, indistinct in the low light but still unmistakably *there*. “Look,” I whispered to Ruea.

She had to crane her neck to see around the curve, but when she did, she shuddered. When she looked back at me, the question was plain on her face: *What do we do now?*

The creature was shaped like a lumpy dome, and if it had sensory organs, I couldn’t see them from here. Could it hear us? Smell us? Feel the vibrations of our feet on the metal floor? It sat there perfectly still, an immobile glob of black jello, like something that had never been able to move at all.

Then, it started moving towards us.

I stopped breathing.

As it moved closer, I could see it more clearly. It was taller than me, black but slightly translucent, showing tiny specks inside its body. It looked like a starry sky, although I knew the specks had to be small internal organs, or worse, bits of the passengers and crew. It

moved like an amoeba, snaking out gooey pseudopods to propel itself forward. And embedded everywhere along its surface were *eyes*. They were tiny but unmistakable, round white things with multicolored irises and pupils as black as night.

I stood frozen against the wall, hoping against hope that it would pass us by. And maybe it would have, if its pseudopod hadn't brushed Ruea's bare foot. She screamed, and I shot without thinking. My bolt puckered its skin, but it didn't seem to stop the thing. It reared, or really tipped, back, exposing rows upon rows of pointed teeth that had been hidden against the ground.

I screamed. Ruea leaped across the trail, grabbing my arm and yanking me through the nearest door. It slid closed behind us, and I pressed myself to the doorpad, locking it.

We were in one of the crew bedrooms, which was eerily similar to the rooms on board the Roadblock. Same metal-framed bunk beds, same desk and dresser bolted to the floor, same tiny viewscreen built into the wall. Here, though, the desk was cluttered with photographs, and dirty laundry lay abandoned on the floor. There was a stuffed animal, too old to be distinguishable as a bear or gorlish or uulad, staring forlornly at us from the dresser. I was struck then by the tragedy of the whole thing. So many people would be on a ship this size.

The creature threw itself at the door with a hideous squelching sound, snapping me back to the present. We would go the way of those skeletons if we didn't come up with a plan.

Ruea was pacing the room, obviously thinking the same thing.

"Any clever ideas?" I asked her.

"No, but one really bad one."

"That's more than what I have. Hit me."

Ruea sighed. “There are maintenance tubes leading to every room in a ship like this. In theory, we can crawl out through them and find our way back to the Roadblock. In practice, we’ll get hopelessly lost and die of suffocation, if that thing doesn’t get us first.

The thing in question threw itself against the door again, and I shuddered. “Let’s do it. At least in the tubes we have a chance—we’re dead if we stay here.”

“Looks like that’s the entrance,” said Ruea, pointing to a round panel on the ceiling. “But it’s too far to reach from the tip of the bunk bed.”

I gave the bedpost an experimental tug. “It’s bolted to the floor.”

Ruea let out a little wail, covering her face with her hands. “Stars, we’re dead.”

“Not yet. I bet if you climb on my shoulders, I can lift you high enough to reach the panel.”

She didn’t look convinced. “I’m much bigger than you. Can you even lift me.”

“I’ll have to try. I’d ask you to lift me, but my fingertips don’t double as screwdrivers.”

Ruea looked at her hands, and then at mine. She nodded.

The thing hit the door again, making us both jump.

I crouched, wrapping my arms around her upper set of knees and stood up. “Can you reach.”

“Only just.”

I shifted so that her hips were balanced against my chest. She was lighter than I expected her to be, but still too heavy for me to hold for long. Part of my brain pointed out exactly how much of her skin was pressed against mine, but I willed that thought away. There wasn’t time.

“First screw done,” Ruea announced as it fell, bouncing off my shoulder. “Can you take like two steps to the right?”

As Ruea continued to work, it occurred to me that the creature hadn't hit the door in a while. I glanced over my shoulder and nearly dropped Ruea. "Oh my God."

"What?"

"It's coming under the door."

And it was. The crack at the bottom of the door couldn't have been more than a quarter of an inch high, but it was pushing through anyway. Already a glob of black goo glittering with tiny eyes inched across the floor. It couldn't reach us yet, but that was only a matter of time. And if it could fit its mouth under the door...

"Hurry!" I called.

"What do you think I've been doing?" said Ruea, her annoyance failing to mask her panic.

The second screw hit the floor in front of me and I shifted to let Ruea reach the next one. The thing slowly oozed into the room. Sometimes, larger bits of it came through in lumps, making terrible squishing sounds as it squeezed under the door. Sweat began to drip into my eyes.

"Ruea?" I hated my voice for quavering.

"Just a moment," she said, and the third screw fell to the ground, followed by the panel, which crashed into the bed frame on its way down.

The thing continued to ooze towards me. It was less than two feet away, now, and picking up speed.

Ruea hoisted herself into the tube, and I let out a breath. "Plenty of room," she called down to me.

The creature was less than a foot away now. Ruea reached down and I grabbed her hand. I jumped. She pulled. I caught the edge of the hole and hung there, the metal of the ceiling cutting into one hand, Ruea's fingertips cutting into the other. My feet were inches above the floor.

I tried to pull myself up, but my hands were so sweaty and my muscles so drained from holding up Ruea. I kicked wildly, trying for the momentum to swing myself up. And then I couldn't kick anymore.

The floor had become a glittering black lake, and my feet were caught in it.

I shrieked. Steam rose from my boots as the gooey flesh of the thing began to dissolve the leather. My hand trembled. I was going to fall. I was going to die.

I caught Ruea's eye. "I'm sorry," I said, but she didn't hear me. In her dark eyes, there was no sadness, no anger, just determination.

Ruea set her jaw and bent her arm, lifting me up. The soles of my boots ripped away from the sides as I rose. I pushed with my other hand, and though I was weak, it maybe helped. When the ceiling was level with my chest, I collapsed into it and wiggled the rest of the way in.

"You okay?" Ruea asked, panting.

"I think so." I looked at my feet. The creature had burned holes in my socks, but though the skin underneath was red, it didn't seem broken.

"Do you think it can climb?"

"Let's not wait to find out," I said. "Which way to the Roadblock?"

"This way, probably," she said, and we set off.

Next to the maintenance tube, the hallways had been as bright as a summer afternoon. I'd dropped my blaster when we fled from the creature, so we only had Ruea's blaster light to guide us. The air was so still here, and the ceiling so low that we had to crawl. It all reminded me horribly of my time in Rochester's dumbwaiter.

Ruea led the way led the way, and I crawled after her. Passages snaked off to the sides, but we stuck to the middle one, which seemed to roughly follow the arc of the hallway where we'd been. Neither of us dared look back.

Finally, the tunnel ended. It curved straight down, and a metal ladder hung on the side that had been our floor. "This should be it," said Ruea. She put out a tentative foot—the one with the boot still on it—and tested the rungs of the ladder. When it didn't break, she lowered herself down into the murky blackness. I followed her.

The ladder led to a closet. Ruea had already opened the door, and beyond it I could see a large room, maybe a mess hall, lit by pale blue emergency lights. "This isn't where we came in," I said, dropping to the floor. "Where do we—" I walked right into Ruea's back.

She was standing frozen in the middle of the doorway. "My stars," she whispered, her voice trembling.

I peered around her and gasped, clapping my hand to my mouth. The room had once been a mess hall, but all the tables and chairs had been pushed against one wall, the wall where the main doors to the room were. Against the opposite wall: bones.

They had been stripped clean, just like the skeletons in the cockpit, but these were less cohesive. There were a few complete skeletons sprawled across the floor, reaching for an escape they'd never make, but most of the bones were just, well, bones. A skull here, a femur

there. There were even a few strips of exoskeleton that looked like they'd once belonged to a Crustean.

I couldn't move. My knees wouldn't bend. The only thing I could do was stare at the bones and think, *these were people. These were so many people.*

Ruea picked up a skull from the floor. From its flattened forehead, I could tell its owner had been Dystyi. "It must have been horrible," she said.

I nodded. I could imagine it—the crew and passengers must have hidden in here, blocked off the door to keep the creature out, not realizing that they were sealing themselves in. And when the thing just slid under the door—I shuddered. I could almost hear the echoes of screams bouncing off the mess hall walls.

Ruea was still staring at the skull. "We should—we should do something. Put them to rest."

"I don't know," I said. "We're not qualified—"

"We're all they have," she said. Then she made a series of clicking noises that I assumed were untranslated Crustean. Translators did that sometimes, when it came to prayers. Her eyes were closed, her mouth moving fervently. I felt a stab of guilt for not joining in.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and tried to remember the words I knew by rote in childhood. It didn't come as quickly as the Shema, but I did eventually recall the beginning of the Mourner's Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

“‘Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mea raba, b'alma di v'ra khirutei v'yamlich malchutai. B'chyechon uv'yomechon uv'chayei d'chol biet yisrael.” That wasn't even half the prayer, but it was all I still knew, so I simply said, “Amen.” I figured the dead, or God, or whoever would appreciate the effort.

I waited for Ruea to finish her own prayer. Finally, she set the skull back on the floor. Tears had left streaks down her face and I wanted to wipe them away, but that seemed completely inappropriate so I just said, “We’d better get going.”

She nodded and re-mounted the ladder. She was silent, but she moved slowly now, and her trembling shoulders told me she was still crying. I wanted to cry too. I’d seen some disturbing things in my life, but nothing that even approached the horror of that.

I couldn’t let myself focus on what I’d seen, though. I wasn’t dead yet. Ruea and I had a chance of making it out of this, even if it wasn’t likely.

This time, Ruea took the first corridor that branched to the right. After perhaps twenty minutes of crawling, she whispered back to me, “Here we are.” She undid the bolts holding the panel from the back and let it crash to the ground. I peered over the edge. Sure enough, there was the hallway with the knocked-over chairs and the blinking error lights. I dropped to the floor, and Ruea jumped down behind me, landing like a cat. Guess those extra knees are good for something.

Down the hall to our right was the closed door that had blocked out way before. We were on the other side! I couldn’t help it—I burst out laughing. Ruea laughed too, clutching my shoulder. I felt the weight of fear and desperation lift from my chest, and taking her hand, I broke into a run. Ruea held on to me as we raced towards the ship, still laughing.

I threw my head back, letting the air toss my pony tail as it rushed past and then—I fell. My feet caught on something, and I was sent sprawling, barely able to catch myself before my chin slammed into the floor.



“What...?” I began, pulling myself up, but I stopped when I saw the horror on Ruea’s face. I looked back at the floor where I’d fallen. I’d slid right into a trail of black slime, slime that led through the docking doors and straight into the Roadblock.

All the air came out of my lungs in a rush. I kept staring at the open door like something was going to change, like the slime was going to disappear and everything was going to go back to normal.

“What do we do?” said Ruea, her voice barely a whisper.

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t understand it.

Ruea spoke quickly. “We can seal off the ship and pull all the oxygen from here, maybe. But we wouldn’t be able to completely re-oxygenate the Roadblock, and we don’t even know if it *needs* oxygen. If we only knew what it was, we could—”

“Logs,” I said.

“What?”

I pushed myself to my feet. “Big ship like this, there are logs. A captain’s log at least, and probably others. If they knew what was happening to them, they’d have put it in a log.”

“That’s a big if. It could have happened too fast for them to record.”

“I know. But it’s our best shot at finding out what the thing is, and maybe how to stop it. We seal off the ship and go looking for logs.”

Ruea gave a sharp nod and punched some commands into a wall panel. The doors of both ships closed with a hiss, locking tight. Then, she typed in something else, and the front of the docking bay sizzled yellow—a force field. “That should keep it out.”

“Any guesses where the captain lived?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’ll be on the back hall where we just were. It should connect up over here.” She led me down the corridor and, after a couple of turns, back to the hallway we’d been on before, with all the crew bedrooms. About a quarter of the way down, she stopped. “This is it.”

The door wasn’t marked, so I asked, “How do you know?”

“The doors are father apart here than the other ones are, so this is the biggest room. That usually means it’s the captain’s.” Ruea overrode the lock, and we stepped inside.

It was definitely the Captain’s room. There was a real bed, twice as wide as the bunks in the other rooms, and a handsome wooden wardrobe instead of a sliding closet door. An ornate mirror hung over the dresser and a small bookshelf was bolted to the far wall. A star chart was pinned over the bed. Most impressively, where the crew only had small viewscreens in their walls, the one behind the Captain’s desk was huge.

Ruea sat down at the desk and turned the viewscreen on. The keyboard shone to life from beneath the glass of the table. She searched the Captain’s files until she found the logs.

A video expanded to fill the screen. A tired looking Ysi woman gazed out at us, her green skin wrinkled, her blue hair pinned back under a Captian’s cap. “Takeoff log, 3083, fifth rotaion, four hundred hours.”

“More than two years ago,” whispered Ruea.

“No wonder the thing was hungry,” I replied.

“This is Captian Lofin. All passengers and cargo are safely aboard.” She sighed and adjusted her cap. “I admit to being deeply uncomfortable with the Government’s insistence that I take on unidentified cargo. I know that it’s not my decision to make, but I want my

feelings on record nonetheless. The ship is fully fueled and stocked, and we should make landing in Arn within two weeks.” The video ended.

Ruea said, “She didn’t know what it was. We’re stuck.”

“Wait,” I said. “There might be more.”

A second video started playing. It was the captain again. The lines on her forehead, which are always pronounced on Ysi, looked like canyons. “Emergency log, 3083, ninth rotation, sixteen hundred hours. I have broken protocol. If the council sees fit to revoke my command, I won’t protest, but I want it known that I acted in the best interests of my ship, passengers and crew.” The woman took a deep breath before continuing.

“I opened the box. I’m not sorry I did it. I only wish I had done so earlier. I would never have left port with an Orzel on my ship, even a hibernating one. My crew re-sealed the box and set up a force field around it, but none of that is a guarantee.” The Captain shook her head, and then the video stopped.

“An Orzel!” I breathed. “We can look it up, find out what it’s weaknesses are, maybe even—”

It was Ruea’s turn to stop me. She gestured to the screen, which was playing yet another video.

“Emergency log,” said the Captain, not bothering with the date. Her hair stood out like bristles, her coat was half-unbuttoned, and her hat was gone. “It’s out. I don’t know how, but it’s loose in the ship. We sent out a distress signal, but I don’t have much hope. The pilots are monitoring for help anyway. The rest of the crew is rounding up the passengers. They’re going to barricade the mess hall. It’s their best chance. As for me,” she continued, pulling a massive blaster into frame and cocking it, “I’m going to head the thing off. This is my ship,

and I won't be cowed by some feral beast." She hesitated, looking like she might say something else, but then her mouth hardened and she turned the camera off.

The video player shrank back down to the corner. Ruea and I stared at it in silence, stunned.

"Fuck," I said.

"Yes," said Ruea.

"At least we can look up the name."

"I hope the database is still intact."

It seemed that Orzels don't eat computer chips, because the database worked fine. It took Ruea just a few minutes to find the article on Orzels in the Galactic Encyclopedia. It wasn't very long.

Ruea read it aloud. "Orzel: a plasmoid unigender species native to the Alrian system. Thought to be semi-sentient, though no successful communication has been established. High-level predators capable of ingesting most organic soft tissue, Orzels can go months at a time without nourishment, and days without oxygen. However, they require near-constant hydration, and prefer moist environments. Orzels have been used as biological weapons—it has a link to the Alrian Monster Wars. Currently, transporting an Orzel into enemy space is considered a war crime by the Galactic Interplanetary Union, and possessing one without proper documentation is a felony."

I sighed. "Too bad there's not a section on how to kill it." Then I thought better of myself and backtracked. "Not that we necessarily have to kill it! Not if it's semi-sentient. I know you're not cool with that."

Ruea's jaw was set grimly. "Nothing even semi-sentient could kill that recklessly."

I immediately thought of a dozen counter-examples to Ruea's pronouncement, but I kept my mouth shut. Her being okay with killing it made my life that much easier. Instead, I said, "If only there were a list of weaknesses here, or something."

"There kind of is." Ruea reached around me to point to the screen. "It says they need 'near-constant hydration,' so if we could deprive it of water—"

"We can't just suck all the moisture out of the ship, though. It'd be worse than taking out the oxygen. At least our air processors *work*."

"That's not what I was going to suggest."

"What then?"

"We evaporate the water."

"But we can't heat up the whole—"

"*Forget* the whole ship, we can't do *anything* to the whole ship." There's a hard edge to Ruea's voice, and it suddenly occurred to me how scared she must be.

"Sorry. Tell me your idea."

Ruea took a deep, shuddering breath. "I have welding tools in the engine room. If we can get close enough to the Orzel to dry it out, we can kill it."

"Strong idea," I said. "But how do we get that close for that long? Welding stuff doesn't usually have much range, or surface area. And you saw those teeth."

"I did, but what else can we do?"

"We need something that can create a lot of heat all at once. But I don't know what that could be."

We stood together for a moment in silence. I was too tired to think. I felt despair settling on my like the dust in the air. Then, Ruea hit her fist against the desk, making me jump.

“The Roadblock is a *really* old ship,” she said, antennae spreading into a grin.

I stared at her a moment before I caught her drift. “Ruea, that’s a dangerous idea. Like blow-up-the-whole-ship dangerous.”

“But it could work.”

“It could work. What the hell, let’s do it!”

Ruea squeezed her eyes shut. “I take it back,” she whispered, “this is a terrible plan.” She stuck close to me as we stepped into our ship. After entering the Roadblock, the Orzel’s trail went straight down the corridor and disappeared under the door of the cockpit. I tried not to think about what it was doing to my controls.

The encyclopedia hadn’t mentioned the Orzel’s sensory perception, so we decided to be careful, walking as quietly as possible and not talking above a whisper. Since we had to avoid the slime on the floor, what should have been a few seconds walk turned into an agonizingly long journey.

The upside: Ruea was holding my hand again.

Finally, we reached the trapdoor that led to the engine room. Ruea swallowed hard. “This is where I leave you.”

My stomach twisted, but that was the plan. “Be safe,” I told her, trying to convey everything I meant under it.

“You too. See you in a minute.” She hesitated, then tapped me on the cheek with an antenna. She was down the ladder before I could even react.

I crept forward, more alone than ever, until I reached the back-most spare bedroom. Huge plastic tubs sat on both beds and filled most of the floor space. By the door sat a large pail with a spout, not unlike the one my father used to water his plants back home.

I took up the pail and held it beneath the spigot on one of the containers. The air was immediately filled with the acrid scent of old-fashioned rocket fuel. It made a drumming sound when it hit the bottom of the bucket that was achingly loud in the otherwise silent ship. The fumes curdled in my nose. I was suddenly aware of how exposed I was, with my back to the door and nobody here to help.

I was scared in a way that made me feel cold to the core, and that surprised me. My breath came in short gasps, and my hands threatened to slip on my pail. I wasn't supposed to feel like this. Ruea could, sure, but she could afford to. She was brilliant. I just had my bravado, my daring, and if that was failing me—

I realized with a jolt that I was scared *because* Ruea wasn't with me. I'd spent years looking over my own shoulder, but in a few short weeks, I'd come to rely on Ruea. And that was terrifying, more than any murderous space monster ever could be.

When the bucket was full, I crept back out into the hallway. The ship was perfectly silent. Even the usual humming of the engines was still. The sound of my breathing was like a scream in the darkness. I peered down the hall, but the Orzel seemed to still be in the cockpit. What was it doing in there?

Something brushed against my shoulder and I whirled, sloshing fuel out of the bucket. I stifled a scream, instead hissing, "For God's sake, Ruea, are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry," she whispered back. "I've got the torch."

"Good," I breathed, my heart slowly returning to normal.

“Let’s go.”

“No,” I said, grabbing Ruea’s arm. “We can’t burn it in there!”

“Why not?”

“*Why not?* That’s my *cockpit!* We can’t just set it on fire!”

Ruea was clearly trying not to roll her eyes. “So what then?”

“We lure it out here somehow. Make a lot of noise, cause vibrations, something like that.”

Ruea nodded. “I can do that. Ready?”

“Go for it.”

Ruea screamed.

One note, high and piercing, split the air. It didn’t waver but still managed to contain all the tension that Ruea had been holding inside herself. It was inhuman, but that was no surprise. I clapped my hands to my ears, squeezing my eyes shut under the force of it.

When Ruea’s voice finally stopped echoing off the metal walls, I said, “Feel better?”

Her antenna twitched into a sheepish smile. “A bit. Look!”

The cockpit doors slid open. Ruea and I jumped back into the bedroom before it could see us. The squelching sounds it made as it moved grew louder and louder. In my ear, Ruea breathed, “Oh, this was a bad plan.”

“Only if we die,” I whispered back, trying for a confident grin and nearly succeeding. “Sounds like it’s almost here.”

“Go get it.” Ruea clapped me on the arm.

I sprung out from behind the doorway with a cry, flinging engine fuel blindly down the hallway. I heard it splatter, the hard *plash* of liquid on metal and the softer *splash* of it hitting



flesh. The creature roared, injured by the noxious chemical but not rendered harmless. It reared back, showing again those circles upon circles of razor-sharp teeth.

I stumbled backwards. “Ruea!” I called, realizing too late that I’d failed. I was supposed to leave a trail of fuel so she could light the creature up from a distance, but all of the fuel was on the Orzel, and none of it was close enough.

Brilliant Ruea didn’t hesitate for even a second. She stepped out of the doorway, torch burning blue in her hand, and lobbed it at the monster. It understood what was happening moments before the torch struck. Every one of its thousands of eyes went wide as the torch hurtled through the air. And then Ruea grabbed my arm, yanking me into the bedroom and pressing me to the floor as a tremendous wall of flame shot down the hallway. I pressed my eyes shut and clung to her, burying my face in the oil-streaked fabric of her shirt. Even behind thick, flame resistant walls, I could feel the heat of the fire. It sucked every molecule of moisture from the air and roared more loudly than the Orzel could ever have hoped to.

And then it was over. The fire receded, having gobbled up all the fuel it could. The air cooled and the noise dimmed, and Ruea and I stepped out into the hall.

The fire was all but gone. It still lapped at some small puddles of fuel and smoldered in the gelatinous lump that used to be an Orzel. Ruea’s torch lay blackened on the floor beside it. Soot stained every surface, but the ship seemed to be intact.

I turned to look at Ruea just as she turned to me, eyes full. I broke into a grin and opened my arms, and she rushed into them, nearly lifting me off my feet. I laughed and she laughed, because we were alive. Alive and safe and together.

It took two days to get the Roadblock ready to fly again, two days of scrubbing soot and goo off of almost every surface in the ship. It had gotten deep into the crevices of my control panel, which had to be disassembled to get it all the way clean. I still didn't know what its goal had been, but if it was to be a pain in my ass, it succeeded.

The first evening, we shoveled the carcass of the Orzel into the ship's entrance and let it blast into space. I said the bit of the Kaddish that I could remember inside my head as we watched it spiral away. The look in its eyes just before it died told me it too was sentient, and though I didn't regret killing it, I felt it deserved to be acknowledged. Ruea smiled as it disappeared into the stars, but then, so did I.

Finally, we were ready to leave. Ruea watched from the cockpit window as I detached us from the dead ship. "I wish there was someone we could tell," she said.

"Going to Ys would take us almost a month out of our way."

"Those people had families. They deserve to know what happened."

I smiled up at her. "I have a surprise for you. I think it'll make you feel better about leaving."

"What?"

"This." I pressed a button, and the nav computer switched from the star chart to an image of my face.

The me in the screen began to talk. "Farewell log, 3085, twelfth rotation, seventeen hundred hours. This is not Captain Lofin. I am a traveler who happened to bear witness to the aftermath of a tragedy."

I was proud of the phrase "bear witness." It seemed appropriately solemn and fancy.

“Captain Lofin and her crew were asked to commit a war crime, and they refused. In trying to prevent devastation, they fell prey to it themselves. An Orzel was let loose on their ship. There were no survivors.” The recording of me paused to take a steadying breath.

“Although my friend killed the creature, these deaths stand as a testament to the cruelty and bravery that people are capable of. I hope that someday, this recording is found, and the victims are given the peace they deserve.” In the recording, I leaned forward and turned off the camera.

“I set that to play on all the viewscreens as soon as someone boards the ship, and I made sure the distress call is still broadcasting. They’ll know, someday.”

Ruea’s voice was hoarse as she said, “Thank you, Naomi.”

“Yeah, well. Least I can do.” I shrugged, trying to play it off, but Ruea took my hand in hers and looked directly into my eyes.

“Thank you,” she said again, and this time, I smiled.

Part 5

Last Chance Space Mall was exactly what it claimed to be: The last place you could stock up on water, fuel, anything before you entered the B76-I8 region of space, colloquially known as the Expanse. The Expanse was an empty wasteland that stretched between inhabited regions of space. Once we entered it, we had three weeks of travel with no stars, no planets, no help if anything went wrong. And right on the edge of this nothing, some enterprising folks had set up a space station and called it a mall.

“You’ve been here before, right?” Ruea said as we stepped out of the Roadblock and onto the landing pad.

“Ages ago. I don’t remember it all that well. It was clean, though. Like, weirdly clean.”

Ruea laughed. “That made an impression on you, huh?”

“It’s just, the ships I’d been working on were so junky, it stood out.”

“Uh huh. Are you sure it wasn’t just your floor?”

I elbowed her—mostly just hurting myself on her exoskeleton—and she laughed again. Then we stepped out of the landing area and into the mall proper, and she gasped.

“Stars, it’s a sphere!”

“Well obviously. You saw it from the outside.”

“Yes but I assumed it was in sections, or floors. Not like this.”

In Ruea’s defense, the mall was set up differently from any place I’d ever been. The stores ringed the outside of the sphere in tiers, with walkways spiraling up and down. The walkways were lined with fake-looking greenery that complimented the trim on all the doorways. The walls and floor gleamed a blinding white. The center of the sphere was hollow and gravity-less, with what we’ll call, for lack of a better word, a pond hanging in the middle of it. It was a massive glob of water, mostly spherical but shifting based on changes

in air pressure that I couldn't sense, with tiny golden fish flashing through it. I was too cool to gape at it the way Ruea was, but I had to admit, it was pretty amazing. A feat of engineering.

"Will the gravity on the walkways hold?" Ruea asked.

Before I could say anything, a Dystyi man in the green-and-white uniform of the mall answered, "Absolutely. The artificial gravity is strong enough to hold anyone within the railings. Don't jump over, though, or we'll have to reel you back in, and usually that comes with a fine."

"Thanks," said Ruea. "Who are you exactly?"

"Name's Daryl Vroisko," said the man with a little bow. "I'm a greeter. Let me know if you have any other questions."

"Yeah, I think we're good for now." I took Ruea's arm and pulled her into the mall proper. I didn't really want to hear about all the rules of the place. Maybe it was old habit—ignorance makes for plausible deniability.

"Did you make a list?" Ruea asked me.

"Um, no? I just know we need water. And probably more food?"

Ruea sighed. "How are you alive right now?"

"I'm too pretty to die," I told her with a wink, but I couldn't keep a straight face for more than a few seconds, and dissolved into giggles.

Ruea rolled her eyes at me, but she was grinning, too.

"So I take it you do have a list?" I asked.

“Of course.” Ruea pulled out a battered portable viewscreen. I didn’t recognize it, but she must have gotten it back on Crustea. She tapped the screen a few times, and then handed it to me.

“Wow,” I said, scrolling through the list. “Do we have the credits for all this?”

“I hope so. Some of the things are redundant, but I don’t want us to miss something and break down in the Expanse.”

“Fair. Where to first?”

“I was actually thinking—lunch?”

I took hold of Ruea’s arm. “Ruea, you’re a hero. Let’s get some lunch.”

To our surprise and delight, the mall had a little diner that sold piping hot Crustean-style pomadros. We sat at a table in the walkway, eating the sweet, hot pastry and meat and watching the fish flicker in the pond. Ruea leaned back in her chair, antennae hanging contentedly as she ate. Since she wasn’t working, she wore a knee-length purple skirt and a sky-blue sequined tank top. The crack on her forehead had faded to a white line, almost like an eyebrow.

She noticed me noticing her, and I looked away, cheeks hot. She didn’t mention my silliness, though. Instead, she said, “You look nice today.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but it’s really just the jacket. It’s too hot to wear it on the ship.”

“It is a cool jacket,” she said, and looked like she was about to say something more, when a high, sugary voice rang out, cutting her off.

“Look, Near, they have pomadros! We’ve simply *got* to stop there!”

Ruea instantly went stiff, her antennae sticking straight up in the air.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I might be crazy, but I think that’s—”

“Oh my stars, is that you, Ru?” A Crustean woman with some of the widest shoulders I’ve ever seen, tuned the corner and headed straight for us. By Crustean standards she was impossibly hot, with purple freckles all across her face and bare shoulders. Something about her was familiar, but I couldn’t say why. Beside her was another Crustean woman, very tall and also pretty, although with less outrageous proportions.

“Emiliea,” said Ruea. I’d never seen her so stiff.

The tall woman glanced from Emiliea to Ruea, antennae quirked into a look of confusion. “Emi, love, who’s this?”

“An old friend,” Emiliea said with a dismissive wave of her hand, but she slid smoothly into a chair and leaned in close to Ruea. “How have you *been*?”

Ruea leaned back. “Fine.”

“Oh, come on, babe, you’re not still mad at me. It’s been years.”

Ruea didn’t answer.

I cut in, trying to save her. “Ruea, if you’re done eating, we can go hit that electronics store.”

“Are you still doing engineering then?” Emiliea said, and I blanched. I’d given her an opening.

“Yes.”

“And are you two...” She gestured at me and trailed off.

I shot Ruea a look. Her black eyes were unreadable.

“Yes,” she said, putting a hand on mine. “This is my girlfriend, Naomi.”



I tried to keep the shock off my face. Ruea was clearly playing some kind of game here. And still, there was a little, stupid part of my brain that was repeating the word “girlfriend” over and over again.

Ruea was still talking. “Naomi, this is Emilia, my ex.”

Emilia stuck out her hand and I shook it instinctively. The points of her fingers left tiny indents in my palm.

The tall woman also held out her hand. “I’m Nearana. Good to meet you.” I was sure we had matching looks of confusion on our faces.

“So Ru, what are you doing all the way out here?” Emilia asked.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“And you should! Near and I are having an adventure. Seeing the galaxy!”

“Is it your honeymoon?” Ruea practically spat the last word.

Emilia didn’t seem to notice. “Nothing that serious,” she said, breezily. “Just a fun little trip.”

Nearana’s antennae twitched at that. There was more happening here than I knew about, and it was making me distinctly uncomfortable. The fluffy voice in my head had been replaced with one that screamed, *get me out of here*.

I reminded myself that Ruea probably felt worse, and so I tried to pull us away again. “It’s been really good to meet you, but we have to get going. We’ve only got a few hours of parking here.”

“We’ll come with you,” said Emilia, standing up.

Nearana said, “Didn’t you want pomadros?”

Emiliea waved her hand again. “They’ll be here tomorrow. It’s not every day I get to see an old friend.”

And so we had no choice. All four of us continued onto the walkway, Ruea walking stiffly ahead, closely followed by Emiliea, with Nearana and me trailing behind. I ran my fingers along the railing, trying to pass my awkwardness off as aloof toughness. I stared down at the people walking below us, two many-legged aliens all in bows and pastels. I admit I wasn’t paying a whole lot of attention to my companions until—

“Get your hands off me!” Ruea shouted.

Emiliea had her hands in the air, but her antennae were smirking. “You want my hands off you? That’s new.”

Ruea’s face purpled.

I stepped out in front of her. “Hey, don’t talk to Ruea like that, asshole.”

Nearana stepped in front of Emiliea. “*You* don’t talk to my girlfriend that way.”

I cocked my head and took a step forward. “You gonna stop me?”

“If I have to.” Nearana was right in my face now, and I realized I had been devastatingly stupid. The woman was *huge*! Seven feet tall at least, and broad as a ship. Plus she had an exoskeleton, and I was a squishy little mammal.

“Cut it out, guys,” Ruea pleaded.

Emiliea said, “You’ve got girls fighting over you, Ru. I’d savor it. It’s not likely to happen again.”

Nearana laughed.

I punched her.

I don't know why I did it. I couldn't win. It wasn't even her who'd made the joke. But I was pissed, and she was in front of me.

It barely fazed her, of course. She punched me back. Her fist caught me in the jaw and sent me staggering back into the railing. Before I could regain my balance, she hit me again, hard enough that I toppled backwards over the railing.

I spiraled through the air, my stomach rebelling against the lack of gravity. I tried to change course, but I was going too fast.

I hit the water face first. I could see it coming, at least, and was able to take a breath before I crashed into the pond. The water was shockingly cold, knocking the air out of me. I shot through it, terrified fish darting away from me, and emerged a moment later gasping and spluttering and still soaring through the air.

The railings on the opposite side of the sphere were fast approaching. I put out my hands to catch them, but crashed anyway. I clung to the bars, gravity tugging at my feet. The smart thing to do would have been to climb up onto the walkway and get a security officer or something, but that's not what I did. I tucked my knees up against my chest, planting my feet against the metal edge of the walkway, and pushed off, shooting like a blaster bolt back across the center of the mall. I twisted so I was facing back the way I'd come. On the other side of the water, I could see indistinct figures that I assumed were the Crusteans.

Since I was expecting it this time, the water didn't shock me too badly. This time, I was able to appreciate the cold. It made me awake, alive, raising goosebumps on my skin and pulling my eyes open. The fish swirled around me, drawn in and out by the currents I created.

And then I burst back into the air. There was Nearana, looming over Ruea while Emiliea smirked in the background. Ruea looked like she was shouting something, but I guess I had water in my ears, because I couldn't tell what it was.

My aim had been right. I was still a little higher than the railing. Nearana didn't notice me until just before I hit her. I crashed into her, and we both fell to the floor, gravity claiming me at last. I landed on her chest, smashing my fist into her jaw again and again. Shouts rang out behind me, but I didn't pay them attention.

Hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me off her. I struggled, knocking some of them away, but more took hold of me until I was forced to my feet. Then Ruea's face swam into my field of vision.

"Naomi," she was saying, "what's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" I spat. "She was—she was..." but my reasons for attacking Nearana suddenly felt silly and hollow.

The people holding my arms—I now saw that they were security guards—wrenched me away from Ruea and into an elevator. She stood there with her arms folded, not even trying to stop them.

"Wait!" I cried. "You don't understand!" But no one was listening to me.

I sat in a tiny jail cell on the bottom floor of the mall. It reminded me unpleasantly of sitting in the dungeon in Rochester's manor. The furnishings were similar—same padded bench for sleeping, same stainless steel toilet, same flickering force field separating me from the rest of the world—but this one was even smaller. Nearana was in the cell two doors down. I couldn't see her now, but I'd watched them bring her in, just after me.

Once I had calmed down, the head of security, a wrinkly Ysi woman, had explained my charges. For inflicting violence on another customer and contaminating the pond, I had to pay a fee of 15,000 credits. I'd be held here until I or someone else paid up. When I told her I didn't have that kind of money, she shrugged. "That's not my problem."

After that, I'd been left alone. I considered trying to break out, but the force field was strong. Anyway, last time I'd broken out, I'd done it to rescue Ruea. This time, Ruea had watched me be dragged away, and she'd done nothing.

At the same time, I couldn't just stay here forever. My chest closed in on itself just by my thinking about it.

At that moment, the door to the little jail opened and Ruea entered, followed by a guard. He pressed a couple of buttons and then said, "The sound shield is down. You can talk to her."

I jumped to my feet and ran to the force field. "Ruea! What's going on?"

She didn't meet my eye. "I explained what happened. Because you were pushed, they've dropped the contamination charges, but you still have to pay nine thousand credits."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"You should have thought about that before you punched Nearana. Naomi, what the hell got into you?"

"I don't know," I said. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"I'm sure."

"I'm serious, Ruea. I couldn't just let them treat you like that!"

Ruea sighed. She took a chair from the control desk in the center of the room and dragged it over, sitting down. “I told you not to get involved. She would have left me alone eventually. You made it all worse.”

“I was trying to protect you.” It sounded hollow even as I said it. “You know what I mean.”

“Well stop. Emi just wants attention. You cause drama, you play into her hands.”

“You could have told me that. Who *is* she, anyway?”

“I told you already, she’s my ex. We were together for a year and a half. I haven’t seen her since we got divorced three years ago. She’s not a very good person.”

I gaped at her. “You were *married* to her? How come you never told me?”

“Who’s in the jail cell here? I don’t owe you an explanation.”

I covered my face with my hands. “I guess not. God, what am I going to do?”

“Well first, you’re going to give me a proper apology.” Ruea crossed her arms and leaned back. She was looking right at me, now, but her eyes were hard.

“I *am* sorry. It was—it was foolish and impulsive of me.”

“It was.”

“I hope you know that I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Ruea didn’t say anything.

“Next time someone insults you, I promise not to do anything about it. In fact, I’ll even agree with them.”

Ruea smiled a bit in spite of herself. “I don’t think you have to go that far.”

“How’s that for an apology?”

“It’s a good start, but you haven’t addressed the biggest problem.”

“I haven’t?” I’d figured the biggest problem was my getting arrested, or maybe punching Nearana, but that didn’t seem to be what Ruea was driving at.

Ruea shook her head, disappointed. “I’ll let you think on it for a bit.”

“In here?” There was a bit of panic in my voice.

“No,” Ruea said with a sigh. “I’ve paid for your bail already. Just think about it, okay?”

“You paid my bail?” I pressed my hands against the buzzing force field. “I can get out?”

“Yes, as soon as the charge is processed. It should only be a couple of minutes.”

“Thank you so much! Oh my God, I don’t even know what to say.”

Ruea smiled at me, a real smile this time. “You didn’t think I’d just leave you in there, did you? You’re my pilot. And if I see Emi again, you need to be my girlfriend.”

I sat back down on the padded bench, comfortable now that it wasn’t emblematic of my future. “What exactly is that about?”

“Emi is... not a good person. She doesn’t respect me, clearly, but I figured she’d be more likely to respect that someone else had a claim over me. I thought she’d hit on me less, and I was right.”

“She was hitting on you a lot, though. And with her girlfriend right there—”

Ruea grimaced. “I’ve seen her do worse. It would be one thing if she would just say she was polyamorous, but she insists she’s a one-woman girl until she sees someone else she likes.”

“Gross.”

“I’d say she has no self-control, but I think it’s more calculated than that. She’ll date someone ugly and dependable, like me, and fuck prettier women on the side. She does this with everyone she dates.”

I was about to tell Ruea that she wasn't ugly, but before I could say anything, a voice broke through our conversation.

"That's a lie," Nearana said.

Both of us jumped. I'd thought her sound shield was up, but apparently she'd been able to hear our whole conversation.

"Maybe she cheated on you," she continued, "but Emi loves me. She'd never do that to me."

"I wish I could believe you," said Ruea. "I wish she'd changed. But after you two were taken away, she asked me up to her hotel room. She didn't even ask about your bail."

"*That's a lie!*" Nearana said again. I heard the plashing sound of someone hitting a forcefield. "Why are you lying to me? You're as much of a bitch as she said you were!"

Ruea's antennae flattened back. "I— She said—"

"She told me all about you. How you clung to her, trapped her in a marriage she never wanted. How you suspected all of her friends of sleeping with her just because you were so fucking insecure. You suffocated her."

"Suffocated? I gave up my friends, my education, my everything for her. I devoted everything to making her happy."

"Well, you *didn't* make her happy, and I do. Maybe back down on the jealousy, it's not a good look for you."

Ruea bristled. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. So, I figured I'd help her.

"There's only one person here who's jealous, and it's not Ruea," I said. "I can smell your desperation from here. And where is Emi right now? She can't care that much about you if she's not here."



To my surprise, Ruea turned to me with a withering look. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

I was about to respond when the force field in front to me dissolved with a pop and a fizzle.

“Finally,” Ruea said. “Let’s get out of here.”

As I followed her from the room, I cast a glance back at Nearana. She was pressed against the force field, antennae standing straight up, hands fisted at her sides. Curiously, I felt a stab of pity for her. If Emi was everything Ruea said she was, she was in for a bad time.

In the corridor leading away from the cells, we passed Emileia herself. She gave me an approving look. “So, you got your attack drahl back from her kennel.”

I opened my mouth, ready to spit poison, but Ruea tugged on my sleeve.

“Come on,” she said, and so I went. I didn’t want to get in any more trouble with her.

Ruea stalked around the electronics store. She picked up a bundle of cords, dropped it back into its bin with perhaps more force than she needed to, and snatched up another bundle. “Where are the A-15s?” she demanded.

“Is that them?” I asked, pointing to a rack of cords labeled A-15.

“Yes! Stars, they were staring me right in the face.” Ruea tossed the cords into her basket, and then turned sharply. “Where would they keep de-energizer rods, do you think?”

“Maybe with the energizers?”

“This store makes no sense.” Ruea made to storm over to the rods, but I caught her wrist. “What?”

“Ruea, I, um, I’m not the best at this, but do you want to talk?”

She stared at me, face unreadable, antennae neutral.

I dropped her wrist. “Only if you want to, I mean. I won’t nag you or anything, but I want you to know I’m here.” I plastered a grin on my face. “I’m playing your girlfriend, after all.”

Ruea sighed. “I don’t— I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel.”

“It must have hurt to hear her say that shit about you.”

“No. I mean, yes, it did, but that’s not it.”

“It isn’t?”

“I mean—” Ruea ran a fingertip across her forehead. “I just—I left her there. Nearana. She’s so vulnerable, and I just abandoned her.”

I stared at her for a moment. Of all the responses I’d imagined Ruea having, this was not one of them. “For someone vulnerable, she sure has a mean right hook.”

Ruea glared at me. “I mean emotionally.”

“I know what you meant, I was just trying to—it doesn’t matter. Keep talking to me.”

Ruea’s glare melted into exhaustion. “When I was dating Emi, the signs of—of how she was were everywhere. The more there were, the harder they were to deny, the more I tried to ignore them. And when I couldn’t, I got angry. If Emi really has changed, then I don’t think Nearana would be that angry.”

“You think Emi’s mistreating her.”

“I’m sure she is. And I just left her in a cell for Emi to rescue. Imagine how much stronger her power over her will be now.”

Despite the lingering tension between us, I felt a swell of pride in Ruea. I couldn’t tell you how I got to be friends with such a good person. “Yeah, that’s really bad. I don’t know what else you could have done, though. My bail was expensive enough, I’m sure.”

“I could have stayed with her, talked to her. I could have not lost my patience.”

I hesitated, then took Ruea’s hand in mine. “You’re incredible, Ruea, but you’re still a person. It’s not a bad thing that you got mad at someone who was shouting cruel things at you.”

Ruea sighed. “Maybe.”

“Listen, if this has you really messed up, you can find her now and talk to her.”

“I don’t want to put her at any more risk. I don’t know what Emi’ll do if she finds out I was talking to her.”

“Oh God, is she violent?”

Ruea shook her head. “Not to me, at least. But she doesn’t have to hit you to hurt you.”

“Still, if you think it’ll help...”

“Maybe. If we see her again, I’ll talk to her.”

“Good.”

“Hey, are you two gonna buy anything?”

Ruea and I jumped. The bored-looking Dystyi woman behind the counter raised her eyebrow at us.

“Yes,” said Ruea, antennae pulled back in embarrassment. “I’ve just got to find a de-energizing rod.”

“Over by the energizers.”

“Right. Thanks.”

With the essentials purchased, I pulled Ruea to the mall’s shoe store. I’d lost my best pair of boots to the Orzel and was desperate for a replacement. The store smelled of leather and

plastic. It was bigger than it looked, with shelves of shoes that reached all the way to the ceiling. You had to get on a little grav lift just to reach the top ones.

On our way to the work boots, Ruea paused next to a pair of lavender flats. She ran a fingertip along their shiny side, and I couldn't help laughing, just a little.

"You should try them on," I told her.

"I can't afford them."

"So? Try 'em anyway. Just for fun."

Ruea smiled for the first time since we'd seen Emiliea. "I'll see if they have them in my size."

"If they do, come show them to me. I'm going boot hunting!"

I left her there and headed into the labyrinth of shelves. It was a genuine boot paradise. They barely carry any sizes small enough for humans on Crustea, but the clientele here was clearly more diverse, and it wasn't long until I couldn't see over the pile of shoeboxes I'd collected. I picked my way down the aisle, looking for a place to sit, and ran directly into something solid—a person.

The boxes tumbled, falling open, and I dropped to my knees to try and pick them up. The person I'd crashed into did the same. "I'm so sorry," they said.

"No, it was my fault—Nearana?" I looked up, and sure enough, the Crustean girl was looking back at me.

"Naomi?"

"Is Emiliea here?" I asked.

"No, she's taking a nap. Is Ruea here?"

"Yeah, she's just over there. She wants to talk to you, actually."

“What are you doing here?”

“Buying shoes.”

Nearana looked from the boots on the floor back to me, and then laughed quietly. “Sorry, that was a stupid question.”

“It’s okay,” I said, just a bit hesitantly. “Are you—are you alright?”

Nearana opened her mouth, then shut it again.

“Never mind,” I said. “You should talk to Ruea, not me.”

“Why would I want to talk to her?” The laughter was gone from her voice now, replaced with an edge of hostility.

“Because she knows more about what you’re going through than anyone else right now.”

“I’m not *going through* anything.”

I tilted my head, looking at her though narrowed eyes. “You sure about that?”

“Of course! I’m on vacation with the love of my life. I’m doing great.”

“Uh huh.”

Ruea’s voice came wafting in from around the corner. “Naomi, these shoes are *really* cute. You should—oh. Hi, Nearana.” She’d come into the aisle and took in the scene in front of her: Nearana and I on our hands and knees on the floor, surrounded by spilled boots. “Is everything okay?”

“We’re not hurt,” I assured her.

“Good,” she said, confusion still plain in her voice. She shook her head. “Nearana, I’m sorry if this is a bad time, but I wanted to apologize for shouting at you earlier.”

Nearana’s antennae went slack, but she said nothing.

“I lost my patience, and I let the stress of the situation get to me. I shouldn’t have done that, and you didn’t deserve it. I’m sorry.”

Nearana was still staring at Ruea in shock, and I have to admit, I was doing the same. I wasn’t expecting Ruea to come out with such an articulate apology, especially when she could barely tell me how she was feeling less than two hours before. She must have been turning it over in her head this whole time.

So instead of dealing with any of that, I said, “Ruea, those shoes are adorable! How much are they?”

“Seventy-five credits.”

“That’s not too bad. I bet we could buy them.”

Ruea shook her head. “When would I wear them? Besides, you still need boots. Have you tried *any* of those on yet?”

I made a face. “No, I got a little sidetracked.”

“No rush. I’ll help you clean up.”

“Thank you.” I smiled up at Ruea, and she smiled back at me. She squeezed my shoulder, just causally, as she knelt to help box shoes.

I noticed Nearana staring at us. To my great surprise, I saw tears in her eyes.

Ultimately, the best pair of boots we found were cheap enough that Ruea let herself buy the flats. Her deliberation over them took a long time, but I didn’t let myself think of getting frustrated over it. Thinking about it logically, this probably was far from the worst day of Ruea’s life, or even her year, but I’d much rather face down a dozen Orzels or a ship full of

pirates than some of my exes, and none of them were as bad as Emi. Ruea deserved something fun and frivolous to focus on.

We finally left the store, shoe boxes in tow. The pond in the middle of the mall was full of tiny robots that were cleaning out the water. The lights were just as bright as they'd been when we walked in, and it occurred to me that the place probably didn't do a day/night cycle. The thought gave me a headache.

"How long have we been here?" I asked Ruea.

"Fourteen hours? Maybe longer."

"Ugh." I put my face in my hands. "What else do we have to do?"

"I think we're done. We can at least put this back in the ship for now." Ruea placed a comforting hand on my shoulder and I picked my head up to grin at her.

"That's the best news I've gotten all day. Never thought I'd miss the Roadblock."

We strode down the walkway back towards the spacedock, side by side. When we stepped just the right way, our pinkies brushed, and I caught myself trying to engineer those steps.

Suddenly, Ruea stiffened beside me. I looked up and saw Emiliea running towards us, murder in her eyes. She skidded to a stop just feet away from us.

"What did you do to my girlfriend?" she demanded, antennae curled into a snarl.

"We didn't do anything," Ruea said.

"Well then, why did she break up with me? You *must* have done something!"

Ruea rolled her eyes, keeping her stance firm, but I could tell from the way that she tapped her fingers together that she was scared. "It couldn't be that you were treating her like shit, could it? No, nothing can be your fault."

“*You think everything* is my fault!”

Ruea turned to me. “We don’t have to listen to this. Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t you dare!” Emiliaea took a step closer to us, fists clenched.

I took a matching step forward, ready to brawl, but then glanced at Ruea and shifted back. “Let me know if you want me to get involved.”

“Thank you,” said Ruea, her voice carefully steady.

Emiliaea snorted. “So you taught your drahl to heel. Congratulations. Now tell me what you did to Nearana.”

“I told you, we didn’t do anything. Maybe she was affected by what a good couple we make.” Ruea slipped her arm around mine. She was shaking. “Stars know she wouldn’t see that in the way you treat her.”

“You bitch.” Emiliaea edged forward, but she clearly didn’t want to get within striking range. I realized with a shock that she was scared too. Of me? That didn’t make much sense, but she clearly wasn’t afraid of Ruea.

“You don’t control me anymore, Emi,” said Ruea. She took a step, pulling me with her. “We’re leaving. I don’t expect we’ll see each other again.” She turned to me. “Naomi, do you want to hit her?”

“I really do.”

“I kind of want you to, too.”

“Sweet.” I slid my arm from hers and turned to face Emiliaea, whose face was suddenly pale. She stepped back as I approached, but not fast enough. I punched her just under the chin, where her exoskeleton was weak, and she collapsed into the railing. Then I offered Ruea my hand. “Shall we?”



She took it. “We shall.”

Back on the ship, Ruea stored our purchases while I got the departure code from traffic control. I navigated the tight space port, and then we were in space, blasting away from Emilia, Nearana, and that stupid floating pond.

When the engines were settled, Ruea came up to the cockpit and settled into the navigator’s chair.

“Thanks for stepping back, back there,” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “You can take care of yourself. Or rather, I trust you to know when you can’t take care of yourself.”

Ruea grinned at me, an open, relieved kind of grin that I didn’t think I’d seen before. “Finally,” she said. “You get it.”

Part 6

A few days later, we entered the Expanse proper. There were no green dots on the nav computer, even when I zoomed out to a crazy scale, and there were barely any stars visible from my window. If there were any other ships out here, we'd never see them.

So when our engine died, Ruea and I were pretty panicked.

I awoke to the cozy rumbling of the ship, made breakfast, and pulled us out of FTL to correct the course, just as I did every day. When I went to jump back, though, the engines made a terrible whine that filled the whole ship, sputtered, and stopped.

I hit the comm button. "You awake, Ruea?"

"I am now. What *was* that?"

"I don't know, but it sounded like it was coming from the engines."

There was a rustling sound—I imagined Ruea was shoving her blankets off—and then she said, "I'll check it out. The hazard lights aren't flashing, are they?"

"Ha ha."

"I'm serious. I need to know if we're in danger of blowing up."

"No, they're not."

"Okay. You wait there. I'll find the problem."

A few minutes later, Ruea radioed me again. "There's nothing wrong down here. I'm going to check the wiring at the helm."

"See you soon," I said.

Moments later, Ruea entered the cockpit and started pulling panels off the walls.

"This is fine. This is fine. This one looks bad—oh never mind, it's the one I had to jury-rig after we got hit. Even if it's broken, it would be messing with the translator, not the propulsion. This one is fine too. Weird."

“Nothing’s broken?” I asked.

“I mean, I haven’t checked everywhere yet, but the ship looks fine. And that sound—I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“Do we have life support?”

“Life support, gravity, even our thrusters work, not that it does us any good.”

I pulled up the nav computer. “Closest inhabited anything is the mall, and that’s...” I ran some quick calculations. “Seventy-five years away just using thrusters.”

Ruea sat down in the navigator’s chair and put her head in her hands. “So we’re going to die.” The defeat in her voice broke my heart.

The answer was probably yes, but I didn’t want to admit it. “Just keep looking for the problem. I’ll send out a distress call. Maybe someone’ll pick us up.”

Sometimes, it hits you just how quiet space really is. The next morning, I woke up to absolute stillness and silence. The cozy vibration and low rumbling of the engine that always made me want to stay in bed for five more minutes was gone. I picked my way to the cockpit and tried to start the engine. Nothing happened. The stars out my window were so, so far away.

For two full days, we didn’t move. Ruea checked and rechecked every wire and coil on the ship. I inventoried the food, and started to ration it out, even though the water would be gone long before we ran out of food. We talked louder than usual, blasted music in the corridors, trying to cover the the terrible quiet.

I had trouble sleeping. The second night the engine was down, after lying awake for three hours, I got up to make myself a cup of tea. Ruea was already in the galley, sipping a cocoa.

“I hate this,” she said, when I came into the room.

“Me too.”

“I keep thinking—if we never moved again, who would notice?”

“My parents. My brother.” I sat down next to her. “Other people, probably.”

“Barely anyone. We’re so small, Naomi.”

“We’re more than that,” I said, but I couldn’t think of what, so we sat there in silence until Ruea fell asleep, her head on her arms.

On the third day, I broke down and cried in the cockpit. I banged my fists against the unresponsive controls and screamed. I’m sure Ruea heard me, but she didn’t come in. Later that day, when I overheard her sobbing in her room, I didn’t go in, either.

On the fourth day, I woke to the same eerie quiet, made a carefully portioned amount of breakfast, and tried again to start the ship. It didn’t work, of course. I boosted the distress signal, and hunkered down for a long day of nothing.

An hour and a half later, a shrill beeping from the off-ship communicator snapped me to attention. I snatched it up, heart in my throat—someone had heard our distress call!

“This is Naomi Mandelbaum, pilot of the Roadblock,” I said. “To whom am I speaking?”

The answer came through beautifully clear, despite our old, shitty comm. A woman with a low, sweet voice said, “Ms. Mandelbaum, this is the Sasna. We received your distress signal. Please state the nature of your emergency.”

“Our engines have cut out,” I told her. “Our engineer thinks we need a complete overhaul.”

“How unfortunate,” said the voice. “We’ll send a tow ship over right away.”

“A tow ship? I didn’t know there was a station out here.”

There was a sound that might have been a chuckle, or just a blur of static. “We’re not a station, just a large ship. My people will be there in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you,” I said.

She ended the call.

Immediately, I thumbed the comm. “Ruea, we’re saved! Someone heard our distress call, and they’re coming to tow us in twenty minutes!”

“Really? But there are no stations out here.”

“It’s a huge ship, apparently.”

“Thank the stars,” she said.

Ruea sat beside me at the helm as the little, two-person tow ship pulled the Roadblock through space. We were going at just under FTL speeds, and though the engine was still silent, it felt so good to be moving again. Soon, the larger ship came into view. She was huge—bigger than any ship I’d ever seen before, and I’d seen a few. She was sleek, silver and bullet-shaped, without a patch of rust or grime anywhere on her, ringed with windows that glowed softly against the black backdrop of space.

We landed in the docking bay and disembarked without incident. Ruea thanked the two people who had flown us back, and I echoed her. They seemed cheerful enough, but then all at once, they dropped into deep bows.

I turned. A gorgeous woman had entered the docking bay. She was tall, taller even than Ruea, and willowy. Her head was bare—maybe shaved—and polished until it shone. She wore a floor-length white dress with long sleeves and a flat, round collar. On anyone else, it would have been simple, but she wore it with a kind of regal-ness that I'd never seen before. I couldn't guess how old she was—her eyes were lined and careworn, but the rest of her face was as smooth as a child's. Her species was a mystery, too. Her face was human-like, with broad red lips and a nose like an arrowhead, but her skin was a pastel blue. Her neck and fingers were long and slender and graceful.

“Welcome to our home,” she said. “We have all we need here. You are welcome to share it.”

Ruea said, “That's so kind of you. We don't want to impose—hopefully, we'll have our ship fixed soon.”

“Hopefully,” the woman echoed. “May I show you to your room?” Without waiting for an answer, she swept toward the door, all grace and white fabric. I glanced at Ruea, and she shrugged. We fell into step behind her.

The corridors of the ship were tall but narrow, with white walls and teal doors that brought to mind a seaside Earth hotel my family had stayed in when I was a kid. We passed people of all species in the hall, all wearing clothes made of the same rough fabric as the woman, but none who wore it as regally as her. They bowed when she passed, and gave us friendly nods, but didn't stop to talk.

“This place is huge,” said Ruea as we walked. “The engine powering it must be enormous, but I can barely feel the vibrations”

“We are pleased that you are impressed,” the woman said.

“I’d love to meet the engineers!”

The woman didn’t respond.

Finally, she stopped outside one of the doors. “This is yours.” She pressed a pad on the wall beside the door, and it slid open.

The room inside was barely larger than our bunks on the Roadblock. It contained a bunk bed, complete with sheets and pillows, two closets built into the walls, and two dressers. A clock hung above the beds. A door adorned the opposite wall, presumably leading to a bathroom. There were no windows, but a lamp hanging from the ceiling provided warm, yellow light.

“The bunks convert into a double bed,” said the woman.

Ruea let out a nervous giggle. “Oh, no, we’re not—”

The woman smiled, a warm, motherly sort of smile. “It isn’t my business, of course. Let me explain our way of life here. In order to keep the ship running, everyone who eats must work. I will assign you tasks tomorrow at breakfast. Meals are served at six, thirteen, and twenty hours. Please do not miss them—no other food is available. There is clothing in your closets, but if it is the wrong size or style, bring it to the laundry. They will find you appropriate alternatives.”

“What about our ship?” said Ruea.

“You will have time off, of course. What you do during those hours is up to you—you may use them to work on your ship.” She sighed lightly. “If I could give you the full day



to work on your ship, I would, but life here depends on a careful equilibrium. We cannot afford to feed people who don't contribute."

I glanced at Ruea. It seemed like a ship that couldn't afford to feed two extra workers wasn't stable enough to feed *anybody*, but mentioning that would have been impolite. Instead, I said. "Thanks for letting us stay."

The woman inclined her head. "I hope you will be comfortable." And then she left.

Ruea walked into the room. "This isn't so bad," she said. "Reminds me of university."

"Still, I'm glad it's only temporary. Let's see what the clothes look like." I slid open one of the closet doors. Inside hung dresses much like the one the woman had worn, along with tunics and loose trousers that tied at the waist. "Weird, it looks like my size."

Ruea opened the other closet. "These will fit me. Strange."

"The shoes, too." Each closet held three pairs of identical white shoes, each the size and shape of our feet. "This is surreal."

"Do you think they scanned us while they were towing us in?"

"The must have. It wouldn't leave much time to prepare, though."

"I wonder why they went to the trouble. We have our own clothes on the ship."

"Maybe they expect us to stay long enough to adapt. Or maybe all this is standard issue—the clothing's all pretty loose."

Ruea picked up one of the slippers. "The shoe sizes are really specific, though."

"I don't know." I sat down on the lower bunk. "I'm just glad we're not drifting anymore."

At that moment, a square on the wall flashed red and a voice—the same woman’s voice—announced, “Dinner time. All persons please report to the dining hall at once.”

I sighed. “She has such a nice voice.”

“I guess,” said Ruea.

“It’s like molasses. I could listen to her talk forever.”

“Let’s just go.”

I glanced at Ruea, curious. “Are you alright?”

“Just hungry,” she said, but I wasn’t sure I believed her.

Ruea and I stepped into the hallway and joined the crowd of people headed for what must be the dining room. There must have been hundreds of people waiting at the doors. I’ve seen a lot of species in my time, but the diversity here was astounding. Some of the people towered over me, heads nearly touching the lofty ceiling, and others only came up to my knees. Most were bipedal, but not all—I saw at least one guy with seven legs. All of them were wearing the white pajamas.

The doors opened, and finally, we reached the buffet. It was a tremendous spread—fresh fruit, bright orange beans, brisket cooked in a brown sauce I couldn’t identify, breads, and delicate yellow puddings.

Ruea’s antennae drooped. “Is this it? I can’t eat half of this.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s cosel peppers in everything,” she said. “The sauce, those beans there, I even see some in the bread.”

“You’re allergic, right?”

“*Very* allergic. I’m surprised you remember.”

“I’m full of surprises,” I said with a joking wink. “Is there anything you can eat?”

“The gruina fruit, and those puddings look clean.”

I grimaced. “That’s not much.”

“Well, we’ll be gone soon. It’s okay for now.”

I took a full plate, and Ruea took an extra pudding. We found an empty table, which was remarkable given the number of people in the hall.

It didn’t stay empty for long. A human woman with dark skin and dyed green hair slid into the seat next to me. “You must be new! I know all the humans on the ship, and you’re a mystery. I’m Chrissy.”

“Naomi,” I said. “And this is Ruea. We’re only here temporarily, while we fix our ship.”

“That’s too bad,” said Chrissy, her mouth already full. “It’s nice here. I can’t imagine wanting to leave. Hey, Lu, come sit with us!” She beckoned to a young man with four arms. “Lu, this is Ruea and Naomi. They’re new.”

“Welcome aboard,” he said, extending both his right arms for us to shake. “You’re Crustean, right?” he asked Ruea. “I used to live in the Crustean system.”

“Really?” she said. “What part?”

“A small town on Illacea. I doubt you would have heard of it.”

“Probably not. I grew up on Crustea, in Litsea.”

“A city girl! How’d you end up on Sasna?”

Ruea said, “Our ship broke down. We’re only here long enough to repair it.”

“Really?” said Lu. “I bet you’ll want to stay. I thought I’d be leaving soon after I got here, but it’s been three years, and here I am!”

“What brought you two here?” I asked.

Chrissy grinned. “I came looking for a home. My brother and I got kicked out—it’s a long story—and all I wanted was to find someplace peaceful. I found that here. It’s a beautiful place. The Sustainer takes care of us.”

“The sustainer?” I asked.

Lu said, “She’s our leader. She would have welcomed you onto the ship.”

So the beautiful woman *was* the leader. The sustainer—I’d never heard of anyone with a title like that before. It was intriguing.

“How did you end up here?” Ruea asked Lu.

“I used to be a trader,” he told us. “We got hit by pirates and were left for dead, in a little escape pod with barely enough oxygen to keep us alive. The Sustainer rescued us. After that, I never wanted to be anywhere else.”

“It must be really cool here,” I said.

“It is!” said Chrissy. “I can show you around after dinner. I don’t have duty.”

I took a bite of the meat. It was really tender. “This is good,” I said.

Lu said, “I’m glad you like it—I helped make it. I work in the kitchens.”

“Where do you work, Chrissy?” I asked.

“Hydroponics. I grow the tomatoes.”

Ruea said, “You must have a massive hydroponics bay to sustain all these people.”

“We do. It’s tremendous. Did you know—” Chrissy talked for most of the rest of dinner about her work, with Lu chiming in every so often with additions. By the time I finished my food, I knew more about the life cycle of the Terran tomato than I’d ever wanted to in my life.

The ship had thirty decks, with beds for eleven hundred people, and one massive dining room. It had a vast kitchen, three huge hydroponics bays, and a whole deck dedicated to raising livestock. The whole place was self-sustaining. It had been built in space, and in over forty years it had never touched a planet.

And no one, in the whole place, knew how to fix our ship.

Between shifts in the hydroponics bays, Ruea and I worked on the Roadblock. Well really, she worked. I held down wires and flipped switches and fetched parts. I got to be friends with the woman in charge of acquisitions. And yet, despite our diligence, the engine remained resolutely stalled.

Frankly, I liked working with the sucre berries better. There, at least, I was being productive. My job was to walk up and down the rows of ripening berries, thankfully in beds lofted to chest height, and pick the ones that were done. It wasn't as easy as it sounds—the golden yellow of a ripe berry and the yellow-green of an unripe one look a lot alike when you're going quickly, and the bushes themselves are full of prickles. Plus, they grow best in a hot, humid climate. Every shift, I left sweat-stained, filthy, and sometimes bleeding, but with a bucket of berries to show what I'd accomplished.

I made friends with the other workers—fourteen of them shared my shift. Ruea and I still sat with Chrissy at meals. She'd enfolded us effortlessly into her group of friends, although I didn't meet the brother she'd mentioned that first night. Ruea still barely ate, but since she worked up in the main produce field, she was able to snack as she went. She was probably running short on protein, but it was a temporary problem, and she wasn't starving.

I should have hated it on Sasna. Every day was the same. I had to wear the stupid white pajamas. Everyone was cheerful and pleasant in a way that usually made me furious. And yet, I found the whole routine rather comforting. The uniform was cozy, and it made me feel like I was a part of a community. For the first time in my life, I found *myself* being cheerful and pleasant. Plus, the food was awesome. It felt like nothing was wrong, like I could just relax, do my work, help Ruea—nothing else was important.

“Look at this,” said Ruea from her bed.

“What?” I was lying on my own bed, arm cast over my eyes, trying to work up the energy to shower. It had been a long shift, and every muscle in my body ached, but I wasn’t mad about it. I’d broken my record and picked five whole baskets of berries.

“Just come see. It’s weird.”

I moaned and sat up. “Can’t you just tell me?”

“I don’t know what it is, so not really.”

“Fine.” I climbed out of my bed and crossed the room, feeling every step in my hips and lower back. I sat down next to her. “What’s so interesting?”

“This.” She pointed to the wall.

“It’s a wall.”

“No, look, it’s been repainted, but you can still see.”

I leaned closer. There was an unevenness in the wall by Ruea’s pillow, like a series of lines. Claw marks, maybe? But they were so thin and even. “That is weird,” I conceded.

“Right? What do you think it means?”

Thinking made my head hurt. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe someone was keeping time.”

“Maybe. But why? There’s a calendar in the dining hall, isn’t there?”

Ruea ran a fingertip down one of the lines. “Maybe they didn’t trust the calendar. Or maybe they were stuck in here.”

“No way. Every hand is needed.”

“Still, I get it. This place can feel like a prison sometimes.”

I frowned at her. “What does that mean?”

“You don’t feel trapped here?”

“Not really. I mean, we are stuck ‘cause of the ship, but I wouldn’t call it a prison.”

“Hmm.” Ruea’s eyes were far away. “I wonder what happened to them.”

“Maybe they left.”

“I suppose.”

With a grunt, I clambered off Ruea’s bed. “I’ve got to shower and go to sleep,” I told her. “We’ve got a long day tomorrow.”

About a week after we arrived on Sasna, Ruea sat down to lunch looking tired. This in itself was not unusual—Ruea looked tired a lot these days. “The ship isn’t leaving,” she told me, bitterness clear in her voice. “Whatever’s wrong with it is beyond my expertise.”

“What do we do?” I asked.

Chrissy said, “You should stay here! I’ll miss you so much if you go.”

“It’s tempting,” I admitted, taking a bite of sucre berry pie.

Ruea’s antennae twisted into a look of confusion. “What about your family? Don’t you want to get back to them?”

“Of course,” I said. “I wasn’t serious. But since we’re stuck, it’s not too bad to be stuck here.”

“Think you can get us a new ship?” asked Ruea. “That acquisitions lady is definitely sweet on you.”

I laughed. “I wish. You should have seen the panic she got into when you wanted a microspanner. Turns out, anything that generates over twenty kilowatts of electricity has to go through The Sustainer herself.”

“Well then, we should ask the sustainer,” said Ruea.

“You would do that?” Chrissy asked, her voice edging into a squeak.

“Why not?” Ruea asked.

For a moment, Chrissy just stared at us, dumbfounded. “She’s just—so important! I’d be terrified of wasting her time.”

I frowned at her. “We’re not wasting her time. We’re buying a ship from her. There’s a difference.”

“I don’t know...” For a moment, Chrissy looked like she was going to cry. “Good luck, I guess.”

So Ruea made the appointment. Her office was on the top deck of the ship, a place neither Ruea nor I have ever been before. At first, it looked like all the other floors, with blindingly clean white hallways and teal doors. The Sustainer’s office, though, was paneled in a light, sandy wood, a luxury I hadn’t seen anywhere else in the ship.

The Sustainer sat behind a desk made of the same pale wood. Potted plants stood at either side of the desk, and two chairs stood in front of it. She smiled at us when we entered,



which sent my stomach into a series of complicated backflips, and gestured for us to sit down.

“You want a ship,” she said, her voice smooth and neutral.

“Yes,” said Ruea. “We’re willing to pay for it, of course. Our ship has lots of parts that work, and we can pay the difference out of pocket.”

I wasn’t sure that we could, but I kept my mouth closed.

“We do not use money.”

“Right. Um, you can still have our old ship.”

The Sustainer favored us with a regretful smile. “That’s good, but it will not be enough. Our society is built on fairness. A ship that flies for a ship that doesn’t? That is not fair.”

I said, “That makes sense.”

“What else can we trade?” asked Ruea.

The Sustainer leaned forward and laid her hands gently on the desk, long, slender fingers bending and straightening against the wood. “You can work,” she told us. “Two weeks of double shifts and your old ship for a new ship. One that flies.”

Ruea glanced at me, antennae curled. “Two more weeks? That’s kind of long.”

“I think it’s okay,” I said. “Like she said, it’s fair. I’ve worked longer at all sorts of places for less.”

“I guess.” But Ruea didn’t look happy.

The Sustainer seemed to notice, too. “Ruea, you look drawn. Are you eating enough?”

“I’m eating fine,” said Ruea.

I stared at her. Why was she lying to The Sustainer?

“Take care of yourselves,” said The Sustainer. It was clearly a dismissal. I took Ruea’s hand and led her from the room.

“Two weeks,” Ruea moaned once we were out in the hallway. “I’m going to waste away!”

“You could have told her about your food situation,” I said. “I bet she’d get you stuff you can eat. She’s a Sustainer, after all.”

Ruea rolled her eyes. “She’d probably tell me it was too expensive, and we’d have to work double shifts for *another* week to cover it.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Yes!”

I was shocked by the venom in Ruea’s voice. “Don’t you like it here?”

“I hate it here! I hate being with people every second of the day. I don’t understand people, and I don’t understand plants, and I *should* understand the Roadblock but it won’t listen to me! And I’m *so* hungry. I thought that woman was supposed to take care of the people here. Some Sustainer.”

I slapped her.

Ruea stared at me. Both of us were breathing hard. My hand stung from the edge of her cheek. She ran a finger over the place where I had struck, just under the scar from her encounter with the pirate captain.

“Don’t ever say anything like that about The Sustainer again,” I said, and walked away.

Ruea was kind of awkward around me after that, which wasn't fun, because we still shared a room. I spent a lot of time with Chrissy and Lu and their whole clique when I wasn't working. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave, but I did my double shifts anyway—it would better the community for me to do my share. Every time we ate sucre berries in the dining hall, I swelled with pride. For the first time in my life, I could see my work transformed into something tangible. My arms grew stronger with the labor, and I stopped missing the freedom of the stars.

Lu had a younger sister who he missed dearly. He kept talking about leaving to go and find her, bring her here where she'd be safe and happy. Apparently she had really bad taste in sweethearts, and was always in emotional crisis mode. Obviously, that wouldn't happen to her here. He petitioned The Sustainer for permission to go, though Chrissy told him not to bother. She'd come here with her own brother, and he'd left after about a year—he had itchy feet and didn't want to stay in one place forever. It was clearly a sore spot for her—she didn't talk about it much. One day, Lu didn't come to breakfast. We assumed he'd gone to look for his sister anyway. It sucked that he didn't say goodbye, but we didn't worry about it much.

Then, one morning, when I got up to go to breakfast, Ruea was standing in front of the door.

“Do you know how long it's been?” she asked.

“What? Since dinner?”

“Since we spoke to the Sustainer.”

“I dunno.” I pushed my hair from my eyes. “Six days? A week?”

“Three weeks.”

I squinted up at her. “That can’t be right.”

“It is.”

“Weird. Well, I’m starving. Let’s talk about this at breakfast, okay?”

“Wait.” Ruea moved to block me. “Don’t go to breakfast today.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“I know. I’m hungry too. But just—don’t. I think something is wrong. Please just stay here with me. If nothing happens, then I’ll take full responsibility for everything. If the sustainer punishes us, I’ll take it all on.”

“Why would The Sustainer punish us? She doesn’t do that. She’s a *Sustainer*.”

Ruea’s antennae crinkled. “You’re so different.”

The Sustainer’s voice rang out through the hall. “Breakfast time! All persons please report to the dining hall at once.”

“I have to leave.”

“Please.” Ruea caught my hands in hers. “Please just stay with me. Just for a couple hours.”

“I can’t. I have to go to breakfast.”

“Why?”

“It’s the rules.”

Ruea smiled at me with her antennae, but her eyes looked lost. “And when has Naomi Mandelbaum ever cared about the rules?”

Something about that stuck in me. Maybe it was her words, or her eyes, but I felt like I had just woken up. Abruptly, the feeling left. “I follow the rules all the time,” I said, but even I could hear the defensiveness in my voice.

“You couldn’t even follow the rules back on the Packmule. Remember when you took that shortcut by cutting close to that red giant?”

I smiled in spite of myself. “Dunnell was so mad, even though I took two days off the trip.”

“He was shouting so loud, I could hear it down in engineering.”

“Really?”

“Well, no, not literally. But everyone was talking about it. The others were all panicking because we got so close to being crisped but... I thought it was cool.”

“Listen,” I said. “I’m sorry we’ve been feuding. Come to breakfast with me, and we can talk again, like we used to.”

Her smile looked more genuine now, but then her face drooped. “I’m sorry, Naomi, but I can’t do that. We need to stay here, just for a couple hours.”

“Why? What’s wrong with the breakfast?”

Ruea took a deep breath. “I—I think you’ve been drugged, Naomi.”

“Drugged?” I pulled my hands away from hers. “What are you talking about? Why would anyone drug me?”

“I’m not sure. But Naomi, your behavior recently—it hasn’t been normal. You’ve been sleepwalking through your days. You *hit* me.”

“And I’m sorry,” I said. “But it still doesn’t make any sense. I eat the same food as everyone else.”

“I think you’ve all been drugged.”

I let out a halfhearted laugh. “Who would drug all of us? Who even could?”

“The Sustainer.”

Abruptly, I felt anger rising in me, white-hot, killing my laughter. “What did you just say?”

“The Sustainer is drugging you. I’m sorry, I know you like her, but—”

My hands were shaking. My vision blurred. “How dare you,” I spat. “The Sustainer takes care of us. The Sustainer loves us. Don’t you ever say anything like that again.”

I pushed toward the door, but Ruea stopped me, holding me by the shoulders. I looked up at her, remembering suddenly how much taller she is than me. “Please,” she said again. “Trust me.”

“Get your hands off me,” I said, jerking out of her grip. “I can’t believe—” The room was tilting. I stumbled backwards until I reached the bed, and then collapsed on it.

Ruea knelt so our faces were level. “Are you okay?”

“I dunno.” I blinked rapidly. “My head feels weird.”

She nodded. “Withdrawal’s not going to be fun. I barely ate, but I still had a bad time with it. I’m surprised it hit you so fast, but then, humans have crazy metabolisms.”

“I’m not in withdrawal,” I said. My stomach lurched, and I jerked forward, clapping a hand to my mouth.

“Let’s get you to the bathroom,” said Ruea. She put an arm around me, and half-led, half-carried me into the tiny ensuite.

I threw up as soon as I got my head over the toilet. Ruea sat beside me as I heaved, one hand keeping my hair back, the other lightly stroking my arm. “You’re okay,” she said, over and over again. “You’re gonna be okay.”

I vomited until there was nothing left in my stomach, until the bile came up green and stringy and then nothing came up at all, and then I sat back on my heels. “Ruea,” I said, “I think I’ve been drugged.”

She smiled, a sagging smile of relief. “I’ll get you some water.”

“Is it drugged too?”

“I don’t think so.”

I took the cup she handed me, rinsed my mouth, spat, and then downed the rest like I’d been challenged to chug it.

“How do you feel?” Ruea asked me.

“I feel like we should get out of here.”

The hallway outside our door was deserted. Breakfast was over, and everyone was at first shift. Ruea and I stole down the corridors, trying not to make any unnecessary noise. We were headed toward the docking bay, hoping we could find a ship that worked and get out before anyone noticed. We rounded a corner, and there, walking straight towards us, was Chrissy.

“Naomi!” she called, loud and cheerful. “Ruea! It’s so good to see you two!”

“Hey, Chrissy,” I said.

“Are you two friends again? That’s so wonderful.”

“Thanks. Listen, we’re kind of—”

“Wait, I have to tell you some really good news. I’ve been deputized!”

Ruea said, “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m part of The Sustainer’s security force now! She deputized me herself. I was actually supposed to be looking for you, since you skipped breakfast.” She frowned.

“But I guess you’re here now.”

“You found us!” I said. “Now we need to go to work.”

“No, sorry, I have to take you to The Sustainer.”

“We really have to go.”

“The Sustainer told me to bring you to her,” Chrissy said, and I realized with a jolt that that kind of unquestioning blankness was how I’d been speaking not two hours earlier.

“We don’t want to go to the sustainer,” Ruea said. “There are two of us and one of you. You can’t make us.”

Chrissy shrugged apologetically. “I already called for backup.”

Ruea and I glanced at each other, and then broke into a run, back down the hall. It was too late. Two huge people blocked our path—I hadn’t even heard them coming. I whirled, but two others had appeared behind Chrissy, and they were closing in on us. They were clearly other agricultural workers chosen for their size, with arms as big around as my waist and placid, dead-eyed stares. Two of them grabbed me, and though I kicked wildly at their legs, they barely seemed to notice. They dragged Ruea and me the rest of the way to the docking bay, with Chrissy trailing behind.

The bay was quiet except for our footsteps, which echoed in the huge room. The Sustainer sat in a chair facing us, the stars reflecting off her bald head. My stomach lurched,



and I thought I might be sick again, but it was just *her*— her magnetism, her quiet power. I loved her.

Ruea let out a cry as one of her captors twisted her arm, and I snapped back to the moment. I didn't love The Sustainer. She'd drugged me, and she was hurting my best friend, the person I loved most in the world.

"Bind their arms and legs," said The Sustainer.

One of the people holding me forced me to my knees, while the other tied my hands and ankles behind my back. The other two did the same to Ruea.

Chrissy, who was standing by The Sustainer's chair, frowned. "What are you doing? They just missed breakfast."

"They're dissenters," said The Sustainer. "They introduce an unstable element into our peaceful ship. We have to get rid of them."

"Get rid of—? Wait, what do you mean?"

The Sustainer smiled. "They're going to take a little walk out the airlock, dear."

Chrissy stared at her. "You're going to kill them?"

"They can't be allowed to stay here."

Chrissy wilted under The Sustainer's gaze. "I just—I don't understand. Why not let them leave? We have plenty of ships, we don't need—"

"And let them bring a disciplinary fleet down on us? I cannot allow anyone to leave. I know it's distasteful to you. I don't like it either. But it's the price we pay for our autonomy."

But Chrissy wasn't listening anymore. Horror crept over her features. "That means... Adam... Lu..."

“Grissela,” said one of the people holding me, an orange-skinned man with the biggest feet I’d ever seen. “I thought all this time she’d left because of me, but you—” he dropped my arm to point a shaking hand at The Sustainer. “You killed her.”

The Sustainer’s eyes widened as she realized her miscalculation. “Out of here, all of you!” she ordered. Then, more gently, she added, “There is still work to be done.”

The honey in her voice made even me want to go back to my field. The four makeshift guards left, but Chrissy remained. She had sunk to her knees, was staring at the floor. I doubted she had even heard the command.

The Sustainer gazed down at us, unblinking. It took work, but I forced myself to think. I found the knot of the rope with my fingers and began worrying at it.

Ruea still sat straight up next to me. “Tell me one thing,” she said to The Sustainer. “Why the drugs? Why the secrecy? People here have everything they need. They should be happy without all that.”

The Sustainer heaved a heartbreaking sigh. “They should be, but they weren’t. There were petty squabbles, laziness, people leaving right and left. I realized that to build a truly peaceful, balanced society, I would have to change the way my people thought.”

“They don’t think at all, now,” said Ruea.

“Like I said, it’s a small price to pay.” The Sustainer considered her. “But you think, don’t you. I should have seen that immediately. Breaking your ship was a mistake, I’ll admit.”

I gaped at her. Beside me, I heard Ruea take a sharp breath. “You broke our ship?” I repeated. The knot was very loose now, but I wasn’t sure what I was going to do when it came undone. I was unarmed, defenseless, and I couldn’t reach the knot at my feet.

“I do what I have to do to keep the balance,” said The Sustainer.

“There must be another way,” said Chrissy from the floor.

The Sustainer’s head snapped around to look at her. “There is no other way. We cannot have freedom and peace. I wish we could but...”

As The Sustainer repeated her talking points, I unpicked the rest of my knot and cast about for some kind of tool. We had a crow-mag back on the Roadblock, but she was half the bay away, and the floor was clean. Then again, I’d spent a month now working in the fields, and she just sat up in that office all day, comfortable as you please.

I sprang to my feet, bunny hopping with as much force as I could muster, and grabbed The Sustainer by her throat. Her chair toppled backwards, and we crashed to the floor. I tried to pin her arms with my knees but my ankles were tied too tightly, and she was fighting back. She was stronger than I thought she’d be—those willowy arms yanked at my hair, shoving me to the side. I slammed an elbow into her stomach. Her fist met my cheek, and I fell back.

She was on me in an instant, knee pressing into my stomach. I jerked up, forehead crashing into her nose, punching her sternum. Blood exploded onto my face. She let out a scream and grabbed my neck, long fingers reaching all the way around. Her nails cut into my skin. I couldn’t breathe. My fingers scrambled at her hand, knees pumping uselessly against the rope that bound them. I stared up into her face and saw a kind of joy burning there. This wasn’t a sacrifice for her, I realized. This was a part of the fun, her own little power play in her own little corner of the universe.

And then I lost the ability to form thoughts. My vision slipped, darkened. I could feel myself sliding under.

There was a tremendous crash, and her hand released me. I fell back to the floor, gasping. My head still spun. But The Sustainer lay on the ground beside me, bleeding from her nose and a wound at her temple. “Wha—” I breathed, barely comprehending.

“I’m sorry!” came a squeak from above me. “I’m so sorry.”

I looked up. Chrissy stood there, clutching a leg from the broken chair, its end bloody.

“No,” I said. “You did good.” I pushed myself up further.

Ruea was sprawled out on the floor. She looked like she’d been trying to get to me. The thought made me smile. “How do you feel?” she asked me.

“Not great,” I admitted. “S been a rough day.” I lay back down.

“There are doctors here, right?” Ruea asked Chrissy. “We need to get them medical attention right now.”

“Both of them?” asked Chrissy.

“Both of them.”

“You guys, I think I’m going to pass out,” I said. Then I did.

I woke up in a plain, white room, with Ruea asleep in a chair next to my bed. A cuff around my wrist sent my vitals to a screen on the opposite wall. I struggled to sit up. “Ruea?”

She blinked awake. “Naomi! You’re conscious!”

“How long was I out?”

She looked at the clock on the screen. “Just a couple hours. How are you?”

“Better. What happened to The Sustainer?”

“She’s in the next room over. Chrissy told everyone what happened. I don’t know what’s going to happen now, but they found a jammer in that woman’s office, and turned it off. I don’t think anyone will stop us from leaving.”

“Great,” I said. “I miss the stars.” I lay back on my pillow. “God, my head is so heavy.”

“You’re on some sedatives. Nothing harmful, I promise. You took a beating back there.”

“I guess. Listen, Ruea, I’m really sorry about—well, everything. Not believing you. Hitting you. Ignoring you.”

“You were drugged.”

“That’s no excuse.” I gathered what wits I had, and told Ruea what I’d been thinking.

“You’re more important to me than anyone else in the galaxy. I love you.”

Ruea stood and brushed my forehead with her antennae. “Get some sleep.”

I closed my eyes and dreamed of flying.

Part 7

“You’ve been to Triasmus before, right?” Ruea asked me. Her voice was muffled—her whole torso was under some bit of engine.

“Yeah.” I sat cross-legged on the floor beside her, a bucket of tools in my lap. “Back when I first left home.”

Honestly, I didn’t want to be going back to Triasmus, especially not with Ruea. It wasn’t that I had ever lied to her about my past, just that I hadn’t mentioned... certain aspects of it to her, aspects that she would probably not find endearing. But after the Expanse, we needed fuel and water, and Trisamus was on the way. Most likely, I was being paranoid. It was a big planet. We probably wouldn’t see anyone who knew me.

“I don’t think I’ve met anyone from Triasmus,” said Ruea. “Hand me the microspanner.”

I slid it to her outstretched hand. “Sure you have. Luiiila from the Packmule was Triasmian.”

“Fe was?”

“I assume. Blue skin, three eyes, fe/fer pronouns—that usually means Triasmian.”

“Wait, fe/fer pronouns are a Triasmian thing? I thought Luiiila was just nonbinary.”

“Nope. There are nonbinary—nontrinary?—people on Triasmus, of course, but fe/fer is a standard pronoun set. They have three sexes there, as in, it takes three sets of genitals to make a baby.”

Ruea slid out from under the engine, worried face smeared with grease. “What are the other pronouns? How do I know what to call people?”

“Ke/ker and ne/ner. And just ask, like you would with anyone. It’s pretty clear you’re not a local, so nobody will be offended.”

Ruea smiled and disappeared back under the engine, worries dissipated. If only mine were that easy to put aside.

We set down on the outskirts of Croesssia, Triasmus' main trading city and my old haunting grounds. The procedure here was for an officer to come on board, welcome us, and explain the laws so newcomers didn't spend their first night in jail. Most places just uploaded their laws to your ship's database, but Croesssia was something of a tourist town, and the "personal touch" was part of the attraction.

Our officer was tall for a Triasmian—which is to say, ne was only a little shorter than me—with broad shoulders, wearing a dark green uniform and a cap that shaded ner trio of amber eyes. Something about ner was familiar, but I couldn't place it, until—

"Naomi!" Ne through ner arms around me. "It's been forever! What are you *doing* here?"

"Alllili! You look so official!"

Ne held me at arm's length, grinning. "Yeah, I work for the government now. Who would have thought, right?"

I glanced at Ruea, whose antennae were twisted in amused confusion. "Ruea, this is Alllili. Ne and I worked together back when I first left home."

"We were young and disreputable together," said Alllili. "Your name is Ruea?"

"Yes," said Ruea. "Naomi and I are travelling to Mars together."

"Really?" Alllili elbowed me. "I seem to remember a young woman who swore she'd never go back to Mars as long as she lived."



I shrugged. “Times change. We’re not teenagers anymore. And you’re one to talk! I get going aboveboard, but working for the government?”

“Who knows the laws better than someone who broke ‘em all?”

I laughed in spite of myself.

“Listen,” said Allili, “you two can stay with me while you’re visiting the city. I’ve got the room, and hotels are expensive.”

“That’s so sweet,” I said, “but—”

“We’d love to,” Ruea said, cutting me off. “I want to hear all about young Naomi.”

I blanched, but neither of them seemed to notice.

“I’ll take you out to dinner tonight, too. Let me just get you checked in.”

Central Croesssia was as pretty as I remembered it, all wide boulevards and purple-leaved trees and dozens and dozens of food carts. The off-worlder tourists were many, but there were more Triasmians. Some of them wore traditional garb—mostly the kemas, with their ornamented hair and jackets with gorgeous, drippy sleeves. I always wanted one of those jackets. Although most of the nemas and femas wore clothes in the interplanetary style, I caught sight of a few femas in puff sleeves and leggings and nemas in sleeveless shirts and sashes.

Allili led us through the crowd to a restaurant called Mount Herb. “I love this place. It’s right by my apartment, too,” she told us as we sat down.

“Holy shit,” I said. “How’d you afford an apartment in central Croesssia?”

“Most of it’s from my ill-gotten gains—you know. I stepped out when I was making a profit, though, and got this tourism job which pays way better than I ever expected.”

I shook my head. “I never could turn a profit. I stepped out, too, but I was destitute.”

Alllili gave me a sympathetic smile. “Getaway pilot’s a shit kind of criminal to be. Too much risk, too little cuts.”

“Wait,” said Ruea, “you were a getaway pilot?”

“Uh, yes,” I admitted. “Or rather, I was a pilot for a ship that sometimes ran away from the authorities. You know.”

“I *didn’t* know.” There was an edge to Ruea’s voice.

“Well, it was a long time ago.”

“It sure was,” said Alllili. “What have you been doing all these years?”

“I got a series of cargo hauling jobs. No smuggling, just safe, legal business. I actually had a steady job for a while on the Packmule, with good coworkers,” I flashed Ruea what I hoped was an ingratiating smile, “but then the ship blew up.”

“We blew up the ship,” said Ruea. “Accidentally.”

“We blew up the ship, and got fired. So I decided to go home.”

“I’d never been out of the Crustean system,” Ruea said. “I wanted to see the galaxy, so I came with.”

Alllili looked from her to me. “So you two aren’t together, then?”

Ruea said, “No,” immediately. “We’re good friends.”

Alllili snorted and elbowed me again. “We were ‘good friends’ for a while, too.”

I turned crimson.

“You two dated?” Ruea asked.

“A long time ago,” I said.

“Not that long,” said Alllili.

I was saved from having to say anything else by the arrival of the food. Mount Herb was a beautiful, traditional Triasmian restaurant. This meant that nearly everything was cooked from the inside out, on heated metal poles. The steaks I ordered were shaped like doughnuts, with the inside nearly charred and the outside rare and juicy. They were served with vegetables cooked the same way on smaller sticks and the house sauce. I could tell why the place was called Mount Herb—everything was seasoned to perfection.

While we ate, Allili felt compelled to tell all the most embarrassing stories ne knew about me, of which there were many. Ruea didn't seem to mind ner company, even though ne spoke openly about ner time on our pirate ship, and she laughed uproariously at ner stories of the stunts I pulled. But at the same time, she didn't look at me for the whole meal.

Allili's apartment was small but cozy. Ne had a fireplace and a faded pink couch that looked like it'd been dipped in cough syrup. I slept on that couch, while Ruea stayed on the fold out bed in the office.

That evening, I was curled up on the couch, flipping through Allili's spare viewscreen, when Ruea came and sat down next to me.

"So you were really a criminal," she said.

I set the screen aside. "I was. Or at least, I committed crimes."

"It's funny because, you mentioned that you'd killed people before, but I never thought it was anything that extreme."

I shrugged. "It wasn't that extreme. I was a young runaway and a good pilot with no references. I took the jobs I could get, whether they were strictly legal or not. I never killed anybody who wasn't trying to kill me first."

“I believe you,” said Ruea.

I looked down at my hands. “I wouldn't blame you if you hated me, know. You've got, like, an actual moral code.”

Ruea shook her head. “I don't hate you. I just...”

“What?”

“I wonder if I know you.”

“You can ask me questions, if you want. I promise I'll answer them honestly.” This was something I very much did not want to do, but it seemed only fair.

“Okay.” Ruea thought for a moment. “How many people have you killed?”

“Nine. Four other pirates, three officers, Rochester, and one other civilian.”

Ruea let out a breath. “I thought it would be more.”

I shrugged. “It's not like I did it for fun.”

“What exactly *did* you do?”

“We were pirates. We immobilized ships, usually freighters, took their goods, and sold it on the other end. I was just the pilot, though.”

“You didn't take prisoners? Or—or slaves?”

“Of course not!” I said, offended. “We weren't *evil*. We didn't steal from anyone who couldn't afford it, either, although that was more about poor people not having anything to steal.”

This was supposed to be something of a joke, but Ruea didn't laugh. Instead, she said, very seriously, “Are the authorities here looking for you?”

“No,” I said. “I never got caught, not by anyone who got away.”

Ruea grimaced. “At least we're safe, then.”

“Yeah, safe.” Maybe. Hopefully.

“Thank you for being honest with me.”

“How mad are you?”

“I don’t like it,” she admitted. “I wish you’d told me before.”

“What would you have done if I did?”

She looked at her hands. “I don’t know.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to get some sleep.” She stood up. “You should, too. We’ll figure everything out in the morning.”

At least, I reflected, as I settled under the covers, she still thought of us as a we.

The next day, Allili took us on a tour of the city. We ate lunch from a food cart in the center square, beneath the huge bronze statue that commemorated the tower's founders. Other statues of important Triasmians ringed the square, mostly of civil rights leaders. With three genders and very rigid social structures, Triasmus had to have two distinct, multi-waved gender equality movements and countless marriage equality movements, so there was a lot of opportunity for people to be at the forefront of history. And all of them have a statue in this square.

“Tonight,” Allili said as we ate, “We’re going to the Beak Room.”

“It’s still open?” I asked.

“Yeah. I got in touch with some old friends, and I figured we could have a bit of a reunion.”

“Who did you contact?”

“Most of the gang. Luka, Marreat, Surooon, Felix. Oh, and Corman.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “You invited Corman?”

“Of course. He was one of your best friends. Why? Is that a problem?”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes it is. You remember how we left things.”

“It's been three years! Surely he's over that by now. And if he isn't, he just won't come.”

“Maybe...” I said.

Ruea looked from me to Allili and back. “Who is Corman?”

“Corman Crusan is a man we used to work with,” I said. “He was a gunslinger. I got into a scrape with somebody important to him. It was a nasty situation, and I left before he and I settled our differences.” I sighed. “I'm sure he won't come. He doesn't want to see me.” Ruea nodded, and Allili grinned, so I figured they bought it. I, myself, hoped the last part was true. Nobody but Corman and me knew what happened back then, and I'd prefer it to stay that way.

The Beak Room was kind of a dive by Croesssian standards, tucked back in an alley, crowded and noisy and always with something sticky on the floor, but it had something of a charm to it. The atmosphere was cheery, and it was hard to stay in a bad mood when you were there.

It looked like my wish was going to be granted—Corman wasn't there when we arrived. Luka, Marreat, Surooon, and Felix all were, though, plus Felix's spouse, a kema named Brrrelat. They'd claimed the big table in the corner and were working on their first round of drinks.

Marreat and Ruea, the only two Crustians in the place, greeted each other enthusiastically and soon learned they were from the same city. Surooon, a pretty Triasmian fema with the best brain for scheming I'd ever met, had a shiny silver band on her finger. He was engaged to some high-class banker and a painter, and the three of them were to be married in a matter of months. Felix, a suave Ysi guy, was the only one of us still in the criminal world. He and Brrrelat, a pilot who he said was as good as I was, had made themselves a decent little fortune and, assuming they weren't caught in the near future, could probably stop working all together inside of five years. Or so Felix said—his spouse was a bit more moderate in her estimations.

We drank and talked late into the night, telling stories and laughing. I drank too much and even flirted with Allili a bit, until I saw the expression on Ruea's face. At some point, Marreat produced an old photograph of us. We poured over it, making fun of Felix's terrible haircut, when Surooon asked, "Where's Corman? Why isn't he here tonight?"

Arreat tilted her head to the side. "Didn't something happen between you two right before you left?"

"Yeah," I said, hiding my face behind my glass. "He's probably not coming."

"Wrong," said a low voice from behind me.

I staggered to my feet. "Corman!"

He looked old, older than the rest of us. His hair was straggly over his purple forehead, and his face was dotted with stubble. He wore his old coat, a bit tattered now, over a stained tank top and pants. He had his blaster in his hand.

"I think you know why I'm here, Naomi," he said.

I looked back at my friends, who were staring at us, confused. Only Ruea looked frightened. “Can we talk outside?” I asked.

“Oh, you want to save your pride, is that is? Coward.”

“I just don't want to make a scene,” I said in a measured voice. “Corman, you have every right to be upset, but—”

“You're damn right I do!”

“Look, Corman—”

“And you couldn't even give me the satisfaction of killing you! Well, that changes now.” He leveled his blaster at my chest.

I took a step backwards and stumbled into my chair, hands in the air.

“Corman, think about this!” said Allili. “Killing Naomi won't bring her back!”

“You don't understand,” Corman said, through gritted teeth.

Felix put his hand on my shoulder. “Corman, please.”

Corman's arm trembled furiously for a moment, and then he let it fall to his side.

“Fine,” he said, “but we're finishing this. Tomorrow morning, Naomi, just like we planned. If you try to run off again, I will find you, and—and—kill you more painfully.” He stormed out of the pub.

I collapsed into my chair.

Ruea ran to my side and put her arm around me. “Are you okay?” she asked.

I nodded.

The bartender, who had been flat against the wall this whole time, came up to us.

“Um, you need to leave,” he said.

“Yeah, okay.” I said. “Sorry for the trouble.”



We trooped out into the street, a far more somber group than we had been. The streets were empty, and the purplish light from the street lamps cast everything in a ghostly glow.

Surooon said, “What did all that mean, Naomi?”

“I don't want to talk about it.

“So you shot Maaalia. We all knew it could happen. There's something more to this, and I won't leave you alone until you tell me what you did.” Fe looked into my eyes, searching.

When I didn't answer, Felix said, “We're involved now. You have to tell us.”

“You already know what happened,” I said. “I shot ker. It was ker or me, and Corman got mad. Love makes you do dumb things, okay?”

Alllili said, “I know you too well for that. Tell us the whole truth.”

Ruea slipped her hand into mine.

I cast my eyes down. “Fine. When he found out what I'd done, he, well, he challenged me to a duel. I tried to talk him down, but he wouldn't listen. So I accepted. And then—” I stopped. “I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay,” said Arreat.

I shook my head. “I ran away. The night before the duel, I hopped a starship to Galliana, and I called you all when we left orbit. He's right—I am a coward.” I covered my face with my hands. “I'm sorry.”

Alllili took a step backwards. “Yeah,” ne said, “you should be.”

“Li...”

“I thought it was me. For *years*, Naomi. You never said why you left, but I was so sure you were running away from me. Because I wasn't over you.” Ne took a shuddering

breath. “But no, you were so wrapped up in your drama with Corman that you didn't even bother to say anything to me.”

“It wasn't like that!” I said, my voice cracking.

Alllili shook ner head slowly. “Corman was right. You are a coward.” And ne disappeared into the night.

We spent that night at Marreat's apartment. She made us tea while Ruea and I spread blankets on the floor of her bedroom.

As we worked, Ruea said, too-casually, “What happened with this Corman person? Everyone else knows so much more than me.”

I sighed. “Are you sure you want to know? You won't like it.”

“Probably. But I think I deserve to know.”

I couldn't think of a good reason to keep the secret, so I told her the story. “Corman was dating this cop named Maaalia. He fed ker tips about where other criminals were going to be, and ke kept the cops off our tail. But ke couldn't control the whole department, and one day, we pulled some heist—I don't even remember what it was—and they caught up with us. I was the only one in the getaway ship at the time, so it was just me, Maaalia, and one of ker supervisors. We had our blasters trained on each other, and I just—I shot. I thought I was going to die. I don't know, maybe I could have shot ker in the leg or something, but I didn't. Ke died immediately. And then, I guess you know the rest.”

Ruea's face was unreadable, her antennae very straight and still. “That's terrible,” she said, almost in a whisper.

“I know.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I have no idea.”

“I think you should talk to him,” she said.

“You saw him tonight. Do you think he’d listen?”

Marreat came in with three steaming mugs of tea. She sat down on the floor with us.

“I know you don't want to hear this, but I think you should run. Corman's still a better shot than anyone I've met. If you duel him, you won't survive. There's no point in throwing your life away.”

“I guess.” I took a sip of my tea. It scalded my tongue and the roof of my mouth, but I drank it anyway.

“Alllili will get over nerself. Ne always does.”

“Maybe.”

“All of us understood what our jobs might mean. We all made tough calls, hurt people we didn't want to hurt. Do you remember the Crasser heist?”

I winced. “Yeah.”

“I still have nightmares about that, sometimes. But I'm okay. I'm dating a really sweet kema and I have a job I like. We can move on, Naomi. You don't have to die for this.”

I put my head in my hands. “I was trying, you know? I had a job. I was going back to my family. I thought I was moving on.”

“You still can. Corman's a mess. He doesn't have the money to follow you if you leave the planet.”

Ruea said, “Don't you owe him closure, at least? If he couldn't shoot you in the restaurant, I don't believe he can shoot you at all. Talk to him.”

Marreat shook her head. “You don't need to. You know he won't listen.”

I groaned. “I don't know what I'm going to do, okay? Please leave me alone.”

I lay awake all the rest of the night, turning the problem over in my head. Close to dawn, I made my decision. I slipped out of the blankets without waking Ruea or Marreat and left.

The streets were perfectly empty. All the partiers had gone home for the night, and the first crop of janitors and breakfast cooks had another hour to sleep. It was like the city was holding its breath, waiting for the rush of the new day.

In the outskirts of Croesssia, there's a kind of dingy public park, with areas to let small children and energetic animals off their leashes. What most people don't know is, behind the hedgerows that form the back border, there's a small lot with an old metal shack to one side. It must have been used during the park's construction, but it's been long since abandoned. The concrete is cracked, and grass grows through it everywhere. Growing up as an off-worlder in Croesssia, this is where Corman used to go to hide. When we became friends, he taught me to shoot here. We spent hours knocking cans off the roof of the shed. I even took Alllili here, once, though she didn't seem to like it.

Nobody was near the hedges when I got there, so it was no problem to push through. The scratching of the leaves was not unpleasant, almost comforting.

And there was Corman. He'd been staring at the pile of rusty tools by the base of the shed, but looked up at the sound of my approach. “Naomi.”

“Corman.”

“I didn't think you'd come.”

“Here I am.” I lifted my arms. “I wanted to tell you, I’m sorry. I’d take it all back if I could.”

“You can’t. The only thing any of us can do is bring ker soul peace.”

“And you think killing me is the way to do that?”

He looked away. “Yes.”

“Then kill me.”

His head jerked up. “What?”

I smiled, but my voice shook as I spoke. “I didn’t even bring a blaster. There’s not going to be a duel. This isn’t about your misguided sense of honor. It’s about ker. And I’m not going to fight you.”

“You’re not—going to fight me,” he said, cautiously, almost as though he didn’t understand my words.

“If I can, I want to help you. But I’m not going to kill you.”

“But you *did*! When you shot ker—I died that day!” The veins in his forehead stood out, purple and bulging.

“But you didn’t!” I heard the note of panic in my voice. Somehow, I thought he would listen to me, would relent when he saw me, but there was no mercy in his eyes. ”Maaalia loved you, Corman. She would hate to see you like this. You can get help. You can move on.”

He let out a bitter laugh. “It’s so easy for you, Naomi. When was the last time you really cared about someone? You can just drop everything and leave, and it won’t bother you. Well, some of us *care*.”

“I care,” I said.

He scoffed. “About your own ass.”

“I cared about you.”

“And you killed the kema I loved. Is that friendship? Is that caring?”

I couldn’t answer for a moment. My chest was full of knots. My throat was closing up.

“You aren’t capable of love. I watched you break Allili’s heart. I know about your parents. You destroy people, and then you abandon them. I don’t know why I thought I’d be any different.”

The worst part was, he was right. I hadn’t exactly enjoyed leaving Triasmus, or Mars, or Crustea, or any of the jobs I’d had in between, but none of them had hurt. Did I really not care about anyone?

I shook my head, pushing away those thoughts. “That’s not what this is about.”

“It is. The galaxy would be better without you in it. And my Maaalia can finally rest.” He raised the blaster. His chest was heaving, but his arm was perfectly steady.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said. The thought hit me like a sudden wave—I didn’t want to die. Why hadn’t I brought a blaster?

*For Ruea.* The words came unbidden into my head. Ruea was a pacifist, so I couldn’t fight back. I cared about Ruea. I loved her.

“Why are you smiling?” Corman snapped.

“Because you’re wrong,” I told him. “You’re wrong about everything.”

A knot of confusion formed on his forehead, and then he must have decided he didn’t care. “Fuck you,” he said, and shot.

I dropped to the ground, barely in time, the blaster bolt singing off the end of my ponytail and burning a hole in the hedge behind me. I scrambled to my feet just as a second bolt splashed into the concrete in front of me. Years of grief and probably alcohol had taken the edge off his aim, but the third bolt seared the skin on my thigh. I fell to one knee, clutching my charred flesh, and he stepped closer.

“Fight back,” he demanded.

“I won’t.” I looked up, saw the glassy, blank end of the blaster, and beyond them, his orange eyes, equally empty.

“Then you’ll die.”

An explosion of rustling snapped both of our attentions over to the side. A person stepped through the hedge—Ruea. She was holding a blaster.

Was I hallucinating?

“Put the blaster down,” she said to Corman.

“Who are you?”

“Put it down.”

He scoffed and turned back to me. Then, his shooting arm jerked back, and he fell, howling in pain, sending his blaster careening into the corner. Ruea had shot him cleanly through the shoulder.

Ruea’s breath came in shallow gasps. The blaster slid through her fingers and landed with a dull thunk on the ground.

“Ruea,” I said, too stunned to say anything but her name.

She returned to herself and ran to me, dropping to her knees and wrapping her arms around me. “I’m so sorry, Naomi. I should never have told you to talk to him. We should have run. And you—unarmed—and your leg—”

“It’s okay,” I said, leaning against her chest. “I’m okay. But how did you find me?”

My question was answered by a second person, sliding through the hedge. “Alllili. You remembered.”

“Of course I did. You two loved it here.”

“I—I’m so—”

“I know.” Ne sighed. “I wish you had told me, but after this—” ne gestured to Corman, who was still bleeding on the concrete, “I understand why you had to run.”

A sob caught in my throat, preventing me from answering.

“The others are looking for you all over the city. I’d better tell them you’re okay. And get a med transport.” Ne pulled a small datapad from ner pocket and leaned against the hedge, typing.

I turned back to Ruea. “That was a good shot.”

She purpled. “I was trying to shoot the blaster out of his hand.”

I laughed softly. “Thank you.” I leaned all my weight against her and closed my eyes.

The sound of metal scraping on concrete snapped me back into myself. Corman was standing, one of the rusty tools—a crowmag?—clutched in his hand.

“Look out!” I shouted, jerking Ruea to the side as the mag sliced the air where our heads had been seconds before.

Ruea scrambled to her feet. I tried to do the same, but the screaming in my leg kept me down.



“Corman,” I said, “Please put that down. Nobody here wants to hurt you.”

Alllili shot me a glance like maybe he begged to differ, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Doesn't matter,” Corman said, in a voice so rough I barely recognized it as his, “I wanna hurt you. You and Li and all of you. Where do you get off being happy? Thinking this worked out for you? Like you're gonna leave me behind to rot in the past, just like her?”

“Corman—”

*“Stop talking to me like you're my friend!”* he screamed, swinging the crowbar wildly.

We all scrambled back, against the hedge, now.

“Stop it!” Ruea cried. “You don't know what you're doing!”

“Oh, I know exactly what I'm doing,” he said with a grin that split his face like an axe.

“Is this really what she would want?” Ruea stepped to the side, and his next blow cracked the spine of one of the hedges.

“Your lover was an officer of the law,” Ruea continued. “Do you really think he'd approve of your dueling? Killing—” she ducked, “innocent bystanders?”

Alllili said, “She's right. Mel would never condone this. Can you just see her face?”

“I can't see anything but her face!” said Corman, “And you, you took her away from me!”

“Then respect her,” Ruea pleaded. “Stop this nonsense and let us be!”

“No!” Corman shrieked, but his hands were shaking. He swung one more time, and the crowbar shot out of his hands and smashed into the wall of the shed, bending it. It slingshotted back, landing at Ruea's feet.

Corman stood stock still. If he'd been pale before, he was green now. I'd never seen a Dystyan turn green.

Slowly, Ruea bent to pick up the crowmag. She held it in her hand and stared at it like she'd never seen it before. She hefted it, testing its weight.

"Well?" Corman said, his voice cracking. "Are you going to kill me?"

Ruea didn't say anything. She continued staring at the crowbar.

Corman's eyes were wide. "*Why won't you kill me?*"

Ruea whispered, "Do you want to die?"

Corman didn't answer, only looked at her as the tears poured down his face.

"I won't kill you." Ruea tossed the crowbar out of his reach. "A medical transport will be here any second. You can heal."

"No," Corman said. "No, it can't end like this. Kill or be killed, I said." He stumbled backwards. "I promised her."

"You owe it to her to get better," Ruea said. "She deserves to have good things in her memory, not more death."

"I promised her," he said again, and then he collapsed.

Moments later, a pair of med droids carrying a stretcherpod descended from the morning sky. As they loaded Corman into the pod, I told the nearest one, "Make sure he's on the list for grief counseling."

The words "grief counseling" appeared on its screen, just under "muscle repair" and "skin grafts."

Ruea beamed at me.

The next morning, Ruea and I returned to the Roadblock. We weren't alone. My old crew came with us, to say their goodbyes. Ruea and Marreat exchanged contact information. Felix lifted me up and spun me around. Allili hugged me perhaps a little too long. "Write me this time, okay?" ne said. I promised I would. Surooon, never one for affectionate displays, gave me a brisk hug before stepping away. "You had better come to my wedding," fe said.

As soon as we made the jump to FTL, Ruea came up and plunked herself into the copilot seat. She didn't say anything.

I put my hand out on the dashboard, an awkward, trying-to-be-subtle invitation. After a moment, she covered it with her own. As the stars blurred around us, I looked into her eyes. I didn't know exactly what it was that I saw there, but it wasn't hatred. It wasn't anger. Maybe it was sadness, or pity, or compassion. Maybe it was friendship. Maybe it was love.

Part 8

I ejected the third map I'd bought back on Crustea and inserted the final one into the navigational computer. This little chip contained star charts and trade routes from here all the way to Mars. It was crazy to think we were so close - just a couple more weeks and we'd be home! Well, I'd be home. I still didn't know what Ruea planned to do when we got there.

*Maybe she'll stay with you. Maybe she'll join your family.* The thought came unbidden into my head. I dismissed it. We were friends, but there was no reason for her to stay once I settled back down.

The nav computer hummed as it processed the new information. I stared out at the blackness ahead. It was hard to believe we were almost anywhere, let alone almost to earth. I could barely even see the stars.

The nav computer chimed, telling me it was done. I pulled up the new specs, and froze. According to the chart, there was a planet directly in front of us. So close that we were almost certainly inside its gravitational pull. But that couldn't be—there was nothing in front of us, just the blackness of deep space! Then it occurred to me—it was rare, but...

I swiveled around and banged on the comm. "Ruea, give me all the power you can to the thrusters and drop the landing gear. We're about to crash."

"What?"

"It's not my fault," I said. "Who puts a lost planet right at the edge of their map?"

"A lost planet?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Just get me that power!"

I turned off the comm and flicked on the landing protocols. The sensors told me I was less than three hundred kilometers from the surface. I swiveled the thrusters, pointing them toward the invisible planet, hoping to slow our descent just a little bit, but it was almost too

late to do anything. We were still hurtling down, propelled by gravity and days of built up momentum.

“Can you get me anything else?” I called.

“Maybe a little bit, but I need power to drop the gear!”

“Do what you can!”

The last bit of power kicked in and we slowed noticeably, but we were still coming in too fast. One hundred kilometers. Fifty kilometers.

“Brace for impact!” I shouted.

A horrible, screeching, skidding sound cut through the air. The whole ship shook. My body jerked against the seatbelt, but I managed to hit the switch to deactivate the thrusters and turn on the brakes. Hopefully, Ruea got the landing gear down in time.

After an excruciatingly long time, the screeching stopped, and we shuddered to a halt.

“Ruea!” I screamed into the comm. “Ruea, are you alright?”

“Yes,” came the answer, “I’m okay. You?”

“Fine.”

“I’m going up there,” said Ruea, her voice tight with fear.

“It’s fine,” I told her, but there was no response. She must have already gone.

I unbuckled and looked myself over. My muscles ached, and there was something like rope burn on my neck from the seatbelt, but it could have been much worse.

Ruea burst into the room. “What the hell was that?”

“There was a lost planet just at the edge of the map. I didn’t have the sensors on because the map said nothing was there and—”

“Hold on. What’s a lost planet?”

“A lost planet is one that doesn’t orbit any star. No light hits it, so it’s invisible. They’re super rare. God, I’m sorry. I should have been paying more attention.”

“Maybe,” said Ruea, “but you couldn’t have known that.” She sounded tired. “We should start repairs on the ship as soon as we can, though.”

“Okay. Let’s suit up and go see how bad it is.”

I hate wearing space suits. The fabric is heavy and baggy, and the helmets make me feel like I’m trapped in a fishbowl. Usually, I can avoid it. The pilot doesn’t have time to run around on spacewalks, or so she can claim.

I settled the helmet into place and listened for the telltale *whoosh* of air that told me it was sealed. In the corner of my vision, a green light glowed steadily. I had plenty of oxygen.

Immediately, my nose started to itch.

Ruea pressed a button on the panel by the door, and the ladder dropped. “You got your lightbox?”

I flickered the device in my hand on and off in answer.

“Then let’s go!”

She opened the door, and I followed her down the ladder. The lost planet was desolate. It looked kind of like old photographs of Earth’s moon, before it was colonized. The ground was grey and made of tightly packed sand. Boulders of all sizes were scattered across the landscape, the result of meteor impacts over thousands of years. Our lightboxes threw them into sharp relief, with black shadows reaching out as far as I could see. We may have been the only living things ever to set foot on the planet.

I turned around to survey the Roadblock’s damage, and winced. Skid marks from our

crash reached out over a mile. We'd created a huge gully in the sand, and thrown the larger rocks every which way—except the ones that were embedded in the belly of the Roadblock.

Ruea walked around the ship, inspecting it. “Well, it’s not as bad as our crash on that cannibal guy’s planet. None of the plating has crumpled up, so we won’t need to replace it, but the edges of the front cone are going to need to be rewelded and the belly’s going to need to be hammered out. Plus, in order to lift off, we’re going to have to turn her right side up, and I think that we’ll have to dig her out some to do that.

“Where do we start?”

“I get the welding tools and start putting the ship back together. You start digging.”

I moaned.

I couldn’t see Ruea’s face through the glare on her mask, but I’m pretty sure she rolled her eyes at me. “Don’t be dramatic. Start moving rocks. I’ll grab you a shovel.” Ruea headed back towards the ladder.

“All right. But you owe me.”

Ruea turned to look over her shoulder. “You crashed the ship, Naomi. I don’t owe you anything.”

I was carrying my fifth rock away from the ship when Ruea came down the ladder, welding tools and shovel in tow. She tossed me the shovel.

“Hey,” I said, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“It’s nothing, I promise,” she said. “I’m just—we crashed again, you know? And we’re



still alive and we're fine, but I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you noticed? Every time you crash, things immediately get worse. We lose our jobs. I almost get made into stew. You *kill* a man. So I'm on edge."

"It's not like I *meant* to crash."

"And that makes everything better."

"I know it doesn't help, but at least I won't kill anybody this time!" I tried to make it into a joke, to diffuse the tension. It didn't work.

"Yes, well, I'm not making any promises," Ruea grumbled, and stalked off to the nose of the ship, as much as one can stalk in low gravity.

I threw up my hands and began shoveling. I had nearly freed one of the ship's fins when I heard a soft crunching behind me, followed by Ruea's voice. "You're doing it wrong."

"How could I be doing it wrong? I'm moving the dirt!"

"Yes, you're moving it *into our path*. At this rate, we'll be trapped on this wretched rock for weeks."

"How was I supposed to know that?"

"Do you not understand how serious this is? We were almost to Mars. We don't have that many rations left. If we can't get out of here soon, we're dead."

I sighed. "C'mon Ruea. It's not that bad. You're a great engineer, you can get us out of here."

"I can clean up your mess, you mean."

"Hey, this was *not* my fault. It was the stupid map!"

"You should have been checking it. *You* bought the thing!"

“How was I supposed to know there was something to be looking for? In all my years as a pilot—”

“And how many times have you crashed in those years?” Ruea snapped, cutting me off.

I was too surprised to respond.

“Stars, you don’t even remember, do you?”

“I do too remember! And I never crashed once until I had you for an engineer.” It was unfair, but technically true.

“How *dare* you suggest—”

“Well now you know how I feel, don’t you! Maybe it’s not your fault, but it’s not mine, either! Stars, you blow up at every tiny mistake.” Then, a terrible thought entered my head. Warning lights flashed in my mind, but they must have been blue Crustean ones, because I ignored them. “No wonder your wife left you.”

The silence that followed was heavy enough to crush my lungs. I regretted the words instantly, but they hung in the oxygen-less air between us, unremovable. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I said, “Ruea?” quietly, hesitantly.

“I’m going to take a walk. See you.” It was hard to tell if her voice was cracking or if it was just the static. She turned to leave.

“Ruea!” I said again, but she’d turned her radio off. Then, she stepped outside of the dim circle of light coming from the Roadblock and disappeared.

Grumbling, I returned to shoveling, but I couldn’t ignore the guilt that curdled like old milk in my stomach. I tried to tell myself that it was her fault, that she shouldn’t have made accusations like that, but it didn’t help. What I’d said, it was inexcusable. Bringing up

Emiliea—it was a betrayal.

Almost worse was the thought that kept creeping unbidden into the edges of my mind: maybe she was right. I should have checked the map earlier. I should have been able to avoid the planet.

I tried to concentrate on my shoveling, but it turns out that shoveling is really boring, so the thoughts kept spinning in my mind, getting worse as they did. This was why Ruea would never love me back, they told me. This is why my family's going to reject me when I get back. This is why I'm going to die penniless and alone, a washed-up pilot who was never any good to start out with.

I stabbed the shovel into the loose, gray dirt and leaned against it, my head on my folded arms. I couldn't keep doing this. As soon as Ruea got back, I'd make it up to her. I didn't know how, but I would. And for now, I'd dig the ship out so well, she wouldn't even be able to tell we'd crashed.

My resolve strengthened, I returned to digging. I dug for an hour and a half straight. At first, it was hard to keep my brain away from my guilt, which still threatened to devour me from the inside out. But as I went, it got easier. I could focus on the burning in my arms, the way the sandy dirt shifted underneath my shovel, the gradual way the bottom of the ship became clear. In the end, I only stopped because the little light in the corner of my vision turned orange, signaling that I only had an hour of air left. There was no sense in running myself down to the dregs, so I stepped back inside the Roadblock to fill up.

I twisted off my helmet and let the breeze from the ship's vents tickle the skin on my face. It was absolutely blissful, and triggered another stab of guilt in my gut. I had no right to feel this good, especially when Ruea was still out there.

Shit. Ruea was still out there.

And she only had an hour of oxygen left—less, because I'd taken maybe seven minutes to come inside and take my helmet off.

What if she had gotten lost out there? She could be dying.

I had to go find her.

I hooked my oxygen tank to the valve and filled it up, cursing at it for being so slow. My hands shook as I reattached the tank to my suit, costing me precious extra minutes. By the time I was out of the ship and onto the gray, colorless desert, Ruea had forty-five minutes of air left.

I set off in the direction that Ruea had gone, walking with my little lightbox held out in front of me. I prayed that Ruea had just walked straight. If she'd taken a turn somewhere, there was no way I'd find her. I thought back to Ruea's words, that we could die here. If I couldn't find Ruea, or she couldn't find her way back to the ship on her own, she *would* die. And though it seemed heartless to think this way, because her dying would absolutely be the worst part of it, with her dead, I would never be able to get off this planet. I couldn't fix the engine by myself, and the odds of someone else finding me were astronomical. So I had to find her. I had to.

I called her name out over my radio, pushing the signal out as far as it would go. It was hopeless, of course. Ruea had turned her radio off before she'd even left the light of the ship. But it felt like doing something, something more than just walking and hoping.

The landscape rolled by. Towering rocks loomed up suddenly from the shadows, and more than once, I nearly slid down the side of a sandy pit. The circle of illumination cast by my lightbox was barely wide enough to keep me from tripping over my feet, much less really

search for Ruea. The ship was barely more than a glittering spark in the darkness behind me, but I could, at least, still see it. I wondered if Ruea could, if she was headed for it right now. Maybe. Ruea had been taking care of herself long before she met me.

The thought barely had the time to register in my brain before I saw her. It *had* to be her, though I couldn't see her face. Just a figure in a white spacesuit, lying facedown in one of the sandy pits that had nearly done me in. I slipped down the side, one hand on the ground for balance, and ran to her, calling her name. She didn't respond. I shook her arm. Nothing. Then, I flipped her over. The whole glass front of her helmet was spiderwebbed with cracks. I pressed on them, but they didn't give way. It seemed like none of them had actually gone all the way through and let her air out. Thank God for superreinforced coatings.

I peered down the side of her mask, trying to see the light of her oxygen gauge. There it was—red, but not out yet. There was still time.

I hooked my tank to hers with a little tube intended for just such an emergency, and opened the valves. I gave her about half my air, watching as the gauge on the tank slipped downwards, as the light in my helmet turned from green to orange. When I didn't think I could spare anymore, I cut it off.

"Naomi?" said a weak voice over the radio.

"Ruea?" I clutched her arms. "You're awake?"

"Uh huh. You came for me."

"Of course I did." I love you, I thought, but I didn't tell her that. Instead, I said, "I'm sorry."

She didn't respond.

"Can you stand?" I asked.

“Maybe. Help me.” She clung to my shoulders, and somehow, even in our clumsy space gear, we both got to our feet. Ruea’s feet slid on the gray sand, and she nearly fell again, but I held her up. “I don’t feel so great,” she said.

“I know. But we have to get back to the ship.” Even down in this pit I could see it, burning like a beacon in the distance. Had I really come so far in less than forty-five minutes?

I planted my foot a good ways up the wall of the pit, but as soon as I put my weight on it, it came sliding down in a tumble of sand. “Dammit,” I muttered.

Beside me, Ruea swayed. She wasn’t going to be much help in getting us out. She could barely crawl.

Though maybe that was all we needed.

I fell to my hands and knees, spreading my weight out over as much of the sand as possible. I shifted my way up the slope, and lo and behold, I didn’t slide back down. I shimmied back and forth, snakelike, trying not to think about how inefficient and stupid this whole endeavor was. *I found Ruea*, I told myself. *The hard part is over.*

Eventually, I got to the top, where the sand was more solid. I lay on my stomach and held out my hand for Ruea. “Can you climb up like I did?”

Her helmet jiggled in what I assumed was a nod.

“Great. Grab my hand, I’ll help pull you up.”

Ruea lay down on the slope and wiggled her way up with even less coordination or dignity than I’d managed, but she was making progress. Her hand wrapped around mine, and I pulled her the rest of the way up. She rolled the last few inches by herself and lay there, gasping, beside me. I tried not to think of how many minutes the extra exertion had cost us.

Already, the air in my helmet was beginning to taste metallic, the first sign that it was running out.

I let us lay there for another minute—for Ruea’s sake, I told myself—before heaving myself to my feet. Ruea stood after me, still wobbly on her feet.

“You see that light,” I asked, pointing.

“Yes.”

“That’s our ship. That’s where we’re heading. No matter what, we have to keep walking toward the light.”

Hand in hand, we set off towards the ship. Ruea moved slowly, dizzily, and though my own panic grew with each passing minute, I didn’t have the heart to tell her to hurry up. For a while, neither of us talked. Then, when the guilty pressure in my gut grew too much, I said again, “I’m sorry.” It was all I could do to keep it to just the one apology. In my head, it was a mantra: *I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry*.

Ruea didn’t respond, so I kept talking. “You’re right, it is my fault. I should have payed more attention. I should have pulled up faster. I should have noticed the lights back on the old ship. I should have seen that sentinel pod on Rochester’s planet. I should be a better pilot. I’m sorry.”

She still didn’t say anything.

Apologies poured out of my mouth, unstoppable. “I should never have brought up Emilia. I should never have kept so many secrets from you, about Triasmus, about everything. I should never have fallen for Her lies. I should never have trusted Rochester. I should have believed you and trusted you and I should never have gotten us into this mess and I’m so sorry, so so sorry, you have to believe me.”

My voice squeaked to a halt. The start of tears burned in my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said one more time, meaning I was sorry for smothering her in apologies. Ruea’s lack of response made it worse, although I told myself not to be selfish. I didn’t know how badly injured she was, if she’d even been able to understand me.

Then, Ruea said, “I believe you.” It was faint and barely audible, but she’d *said* it. I wasn’t quite “I forgive you,” but it was enough.

“Thank you,” I said, and the tears spilled over my cheeks, which was damned inconvenient in my helmet.

The light on the horizon was growing larger, brighter. Maybe we could get back there before our air ran out.

Then, Ruea started to wobble again. She grabbed at my shoulder and slid to the ground.

“Ruea!” I cried, kneeling down beside her.

“My legs...can’t walk.”

“Of course, of course, it’s okay, it’ll be okay.”

“No, I messed it up. I’m sorry.” She reached a trembling hand towards my face, but couldn’t seem to reach it.

“Ruea, it’s okay, you don’t have to be sorry!”

“I love you,” Ruea said, and let her arm fall to her side.

“Ruea,” I breathed, shaking her. Then, when she didn’t respond, I screamed it. “Ruea!”

A tiny light flickered on her spacesuit’s wrist—a heartbeat. She was alive, at least.

Gathering all the wits I still had, I heaved her onto my shoulders. I could be injuring her by trying to move her, I knew, but there was no other way to get her to safety. One bright side edged its way into my mind—she’d use oxygen more slowly, this way.



I stumbled under Ruea's flailing arms, moving even slower than when she'd been walking with me. Worse, as I crept towards the ship, I saw the light in the corner of my helmet turn from orange to red.

I kept going. That was the only thing I could do. Even when my arms threatened to drop Ruea, even when my legs trembled beyond belief, I kept going. I knew if I let myself pause, let myself sit, I would never get to the ship. The air in my mask was thick and humid from my sweat and from, I feared, a lack of oxygen.

I stepped into the circle of light cast by the ship just as spots began to dance in my vision. I tripped my way to the door of the hold, leaning heavily against the button that opened the door. It opened with a *whoosh*, and Ruea and I tumbled inside. I banged the side of my fist into the wall panel, and the door slid closed behind us, followed by the gentle hissing of the room filling up with oxygen. The black spots threatened to envelop me, and I fell to my knees. I stretched forward, across Ruea, barely managing to thumb the switch that opened her helmet. I heard her take a huge gasp of air. Then I collapsed across her chest, letting the darkness drag me down.

I came to slowly. I thought, or maybe dreamed, that I was under a snowbank, with the soft, gentle pressure of the snow covering me. Then, I regained feeling in my fingers, and realized that it was a quilt, the fraying, hydro-cotton one on my bed. I became aware of my head, nestled in more pillows than were usually on my bed.

Then, I became aware of my headache.

It was a shattering thing, reaching from the base of my neck up my scalp and into every muscle in my face. Even the inside of my teeth hurt, something I hadn't known was

possible. My eyelids felt like they had boulders sitting on them, and my sinuses were swollen and throbbing.

I dragged my eyes open, and the room swam into focus. I was in my bed, staring up at the springs of the top bunk. Other than the pillows, nothing had been moved as far as I could tell, though when I tried to look around, my whole head throbbed together and my stomach lurched. Still, something was different - the light, maybe. Yeah, the light was different, bluer and brighter and from a different angle than usual. I shifted myself to the side gingerly and saw that the door was open, and that somebody was sitting at my desk—Ruea.

She noticed I was awake, and her whole face lit up. “Naomi,” she said, sliding off the chair to kneel by my bed, her antennae tilting forward in concern, “how are you feeling?”

“Not great,” I said. My voice was barely a croak.

“I’m not surprised. A few minutes more and you could’ve had permanent brain damage. Why didn’t you open your helmet?”

“Passed out,” I managed.

“But you opened mine.”

I shrugged, which sent my head and stomach spinning all over again.

Ruea looked at her feet. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I said, staring at her.

“For putting you in danger.”

“What? No, it was my fault.” Any sort of validating-her-feelings diplomacy was stripped away by the pounding in my head. “I was such a bitch to you, and you fell, and I—”

“I should have been watching my feet. Besides, you were right.”

“No!” I propped myself up on my elbows. “I was wrong and I was stupid. And she

was stupid to leave you.”

Ruea didn’t say anything.

After a moment, I asked, “Do you regret it?”

“Regret what?”

“Coming with me.”

“Of course not!”

“You would be safer on Crustea, or on someone else’s ship.”

“Well, I don’t. I was safe—at least physically—for the first twenty-one years of my life, and all it got me was a broken heart, no degree, and dead-end job. I’m glad I took a chance with you. I’ve almost died a lot, but at the same time, I’m alive for the first time since Emi left. I’m honored to take these chances with you.” She stood up and looked down at me, her antennae arched in a gentle smile.

One of her antennae curved down towards me and—this could not be an accident, this was an intentional movement—bushed against my lips. My heart stopped. Crustean kiss with their antennae. This couldn’t be happening, I was a killer, she couldn’t love me, but here she was with her antenna on my mouth and her shiny black eyes staring straight into mine and I *could not breathe*.

Then, she stood up. “Get some sleep,” she told me, and swept out of the room.

I did, eventually, fall asleep. I slept for most of the following day, and I think Ruea did, too—when I finally got up, she was sitting at the table in the galley, staring into a mug of tea.

“Gotta admit,” she said, when I came in, “I don’t love oxygen deprivation.”

“I’m not a fan,” I agreed. “Is the kettle still hot?”

“You may want to heat it up again, but it shouldn’t take long.”

“Ahh, caffeine. God but I hurt.” I twisted my back around, trying to stretch out the ache that ran from my hips to the nape of my neck. I plunked down onto the bench with a sigh.

“Are you okay?”

“I woke up with a pretty nasty headache, but I took some pain pills, and it’s mostly gone.”

“No, I mean like, are you *okay*?” I took her hand and peered up at her, still-messy hair falling across my face.

Her antennae twitched into a simile, but without much energy. “I’m fine. Almost dying isn’t that fun, but I think I’m starting to get used to it.”

I grimaced. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Almost losing you, though...” she trailed off, staring into her cup again.

“I know,” I said, leaning my head against her tough shoulder plates. “You too.”

For a moment, we stayed like that, silent and together. Then, Ruea stood up, clearing her throat. “I’d better get to work,” she said. “Tell me when you’re sufficiently caffeinated.”

When I got outside, all I could see was the bottom of Ruea’s feet sticking out from under the nose of the ship.

“I’m out,” I said.

“Great! Do you feel well enough to dig? I’m rewiring and it’s not easy in deep space gloves, so don’t be mad if I don’t talk a lot.”

“Of course,” I said, and got to digging. The ships floodlights cast harsh white beams over

the dirt, making stark shadows behind every bump in the uneven sand. The sky was perfectly black, any stars washed out by our little lights. I was suddenly aware that Ruea and I were the only living things in hundreds of light years. That was always true, of course. Even when we were in the Roadblock between planets we were alone, but it didn't feel like it. Moving faster than light, we were a part of a vast, interconnected web of stars and planets and people zipping around at unimaginable speeds. It was one of the things I liked most about flying.

Here, we were very still, and very alone.

I plunged the shovel into the soil. Time to focus. I could rejoin the universe sooner if this sand got cleared away.

I couldn't work as well as I had before my little trip into the night. I was still recovering, and had to stop every ten minutes. It made me feel helpless and twitchy. I wanted to get off this rock.

It was during one of these breaks that Ruea finally spoke again. "So I've been researching Judaism," she said.

"Oh yeah? What do you think?" I ran my fingers over the front of my helmet, dearly wishing I could wipe away the sweat that had gathered on my forehead.

"It's interesting. It makes you make more sense."

"Really? I haven't been a practicing Jew in a long time."

"Yes, I was meaning to ask, why did you stop?"

I shrugged, then realized she couldn't see my shoulders and said, "A lot of reasons. And no reason. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. Religion's one of the few things we haven't talked about."

"Yeah, okay. Although, it wasn't really ever about religion for me." I picked up the

shovel but didn't get back to work, just stood there tossing it from hand to hand. "It was a thing that my parents made me do, so when I rebelled and ran away, I rebelled against that, too. Or at least, against the going to services and keeping Kosher part. By the time I was out to Crustea I wasn't so vindictive anymore, but there also weren't any other Jews to do things with, so I just kind of didn't bother." I resumed shoveling with a slight sigh.

"That makes sense, I guess. What are you going to do when we get to Mars?"

I paused. "You know, I hadn't thought about it. It depends on how my family feels about me being there, I guess. What about you?"

"I was raised an atheist. I don't know if my parents practiced any religion, but my foster mother didn't believe in any deities and thought the whole thing was just a waste of time. I joined a Taseanist group in university, and I liked the community of it, but I'm not sure I ever really believed in it seriously. And Emi didn't like it, anyway, so I dropped it."

"That's kind of sad," I said.

There was a rustling noise over the radio that I assumed was Ruea shrugging. "It's okay. Like I said, I never really believed it, anyway. I always figured, if there really are souls, they shouldn't be so impermanent."

"You have to understand, Ruea, I know nothing about Taseanism."

"Really? But you were on Crustea for ages, and it's the biggest religion we have."

I stabbed the ground with my shovel. "I walked by some churches on Crustea, and someone gave me a pamphlet one time, but that's it."

"Right. Okay, so according to Taseanist theology, when you die, the strikes against your soul are counted, and if there are more than ten, your soul is destroyed. It ceases to be entirely. Otherwise you live forever in paradise, of course. I think most religions have that."

“You’d be surprised,” I said.

“Most Crustean religions, then. Anyway, I’m not sure I think souls are real, but if I were to believe in them, I would rather think they’re permanent, that our ‘usness’ can’t be gotten rid of.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“Then again, souls?” she made a noncommittal noise. “Our brains run on electrochemical impulses. We understand how they work. I don’t know that there’s even room for religion or spirituality in that.”

I considered her words for a moment. “I guess you could say that, you know, ships and computers run on electrochemical impulses, too. One might say that we’re more than just machines.” I lifted a load of dirt and dumped it to the side, watching the pebbles skitter and bounce in the low gravity. “Although to be honest, I hadn’t ever thought about souls that much.”

“I actually like the idea of people being just complex machines. Machines make sense, you know. There are right and wrong ways to work with them, ways to fix them and ways to break them. And people are kind of the same way. We work until we don’t, and we can be fixed until our parts are too old to work with.”

“That’s pretty unromantic.”

“Not everything has to be romantic.”

I didn’t respond. When I’d said romantic, I meant magical or spiritual or artistic, but when she said it, it sounded like it meant love.

I heard her grunt over the radio. “That should do it. Now I’ve just got to get this paneling back on.”

I surveyed the trench I'd dug. "Don't bother hurrying. I'll be at this a while yet."

Two days later, according to the ship's clocks, we were ready to go. I was strapped into my pilot seat, making sure that the controls hadn't drifted too far out of whack while we were on the surface. Ruea's voice buzzed out of the radio.

"We're good down here."

"And we're set up here," I told her. "Start the engines!"

And start they did. There was a roar, and then the whole ship was trembling. It felt like home. I gripped the wheel, feeling the give of the leather under my hands, and then flipped open the throttle and pulled.

We rumbled forward, slowly at first, and then faster, skimming over the rough ground. The nose tilted towards the sky, and there were stars! Stars, like we hadn't been able to see on the surface, littering the sky. I let out a whoop. Over the radio, I could hear Ruea laughing.

Then, the engine coughed, and the nose dipped, and the roar tuned into a whine. I turned the acceleration up, but instead we just slowed down. "Ruea? What's wrong?" I called.

Ruea cursed rather magnificently. "I don't know," she said. "I thought I fixed everything!"

"I'm stopping us," I told her. The engine was making awful squeaking sounds now, like a mouse being stepped on. It broke my heart. "I'll come down and help you look for the problem." I probably wouldn't be able to do anything productive, but being up here all useless would drive me mad.

I pulled on the land break, and we stopped. The stars were all but invisible. I unclipped



myself with a sigh and made my way to the back of the ship. Even as I climbed the ladder down to the engine room, I could tell that something was wrong, and not just with the ship. Ruea hadn't said hello to me. She hadn't said anything at all.

I reached the ground and turned around to see her sitting cross-legged on the floor, all four of her knees pointing out awkwardly. She was bent over an object that was sitting in her lap, her antennae drooping, her eyes downcast. As I moved closer, I could see the thing in her hands. It was a black pipe, thicker than my arm and bent at a ninety degree angle. Dozens of frayed wires stuck out of both ends of it, and a jagged crack ran along its side.

I sat down on the floor beside Ruea and put my hand between the knees on her right leg. "Hey," I said.

"Hi." She didn't look up.

"Are you hurt?" I asked her.

"No."

"Is that what broke?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It's how the power gets from the generators to the engine. We can't run without it."

"But you can fix it, right?"

She turned to look at me, and I was shocked to see tears in her eyes. "I don't know," she said, her voice cracking. "I've never seen one break before."

"Hey," I said, wiping away her tears with my thumb. "It's okay. You'll figure it out."

She pressed the plane of her cheek into my palm, but shook her head. "I don't know how to fix this." She cast her gaze to the cavernous ceiling of the engine room overhead. "We run

until we don't."

"No," I breathed. "No, you do not get to give up now. We can fix this, I promise you. *You* can fix this. You're the most brilliant, incredible person I've ever met and I—"

And then she was kissing me. Her hard mouth pressed against mine like she was trying to be human, her fingers and antennae tangling in my hair, and maybe she didn't have lips but wow did she have a tongue.

I knew she was only pretending at the mouth kissing thing for my benefit, so I pulled one of her antennae from my hair and, breaking away, pressed it to my lips. I was rewarded with a slight hitch in Ruea's breathing. She leaned into me, burying her face in the curve of my neck, letting her fingers trace up and down my back.

There was something languid and inevitable about our kisses. I closed my eyes and just *felt*. The slick plane of her cheek against mine. The sharp edges of her mouth and her breath, hot against my neck. The tender tracings of her fingertips on my back. The smoothness of her antenna against my lips. It was all alien and sweet. This was not an accident; this was us.

For all my feelings of inevitability, I was still awkward and furtive as I hooked my thumb under the hem of Ruea's grease-stained shirt. She didn't object, so I slid the rest of my fingers under, as well. At her waist, the plates that made up her skin were small and silky, like snakeskin. They were warm to my touch.

I let my hand slide up her back, reveling in the closeness of us, when Ruea suddenly pulled away. I removed my hand immediately, terrified that I'd done something wrong, but the look on her face was one of pure elation. "I know how to fix the ship!"

"What?" I said, watching her scramble to her feet.

"I know how to fix the ship! It won't be elegant, and I doubt it'll hold for more than a

week, but we don't need it to!"

"Um, okay." I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to get it back into a more intentional form of dishevelment. "Can I help?"

"Yes! Hold this." She pulled a series of colorful wires from a cabinet and tossed them to me.

I watched her, utterly bemused, as she zipped from one supply closet to the next, pulling out plastic tubes, metal cylinders that looked like they could have been bracelets, and electric orange duct tape. "I realized," she said, snatching a heavy blue wire from me and threading it through one of the cylinders, "that the main problem is just the transfer of electricity. There's more to it than that, of course, but the principle of the thing is simple. People have been doing it for thousands of years."

She paused, beaming at me, and I realized she expected a response. "Sure," I said, because she was speaking with such bubbly confidence that I figured it had to be true.

"Obviously, the challenge is in conserving enough of the power from the fission generator to adequately engage the thrusters, let alone to make the transition to FTL. Things like this," she gave the broken part a little kick, "have dozens of regulators and reregulators to make sure everything goes perfectly, but all you really need is a material conductive enough to get the electricity from point A to point B and an insulator strong enough to keep the whole ship from catching fire." She tossed me the duct tape.

"The problem is, though, that there aren't any materials that strong on the ship. But with enough loops built into the thing and enough duct tape to immobilize a Raxxon, I should be able to make a close approximation. It won't be the most efficient, so you should go easy on the engines, and we should probably keep the fire extinguisher on hand just in case, but I

*think* it'll be enough to get us home."

"Ruea," I said, standing up, "you are absolutely magnificent. But what in the stars made you think of it?"

Ruea cast her eyes down in what seemed like embarrassment. "Around you," she said, "I'm always thinking about electricity."

Part 9

In the days that followed, I spent most of my time down in the engine room, watching Ruea work. The overhauled engine required constant maintenance, and a truly astonishing amount of duct tape, so she was down there almost all the time she was awake.

I loved watching Ruea work. She had this particular energy in the engine room that she didn't have anywhere else. It was like the place was an extension of her body. Her hands moved so quickly and so surely. It made me wonder if I was half that confident at the helm of a ship.

Ruea seemed to like the company, as well. She explained her work to me in terms that I could almost understand. She talked fast, shouting sometimes to be heard over the engine, and always with her antennae poised in the biggest grin. Best of all, sometimes I would be kind of helpful, hold two wires together or pass her a tool, and she would press her antennae to my lips. We never got lost in it like we had that one time, which I regretted, but there was something almost more intimate in the casualness of her touch. It was like we'd been sweethearts for years.

Only one thing tarnished my happiness during those days—I was nearly home. My family was probably going to hate me, and maybe even refuse to speak with me. Ruea and I weren't going to work together anymore, and we hadn't had any kind of conversation as to the nature of our relationship. She had no obligation to me. If she wanted to, she could pack up and go elsewhere. As natural as we felt together, we weren't really a couple.

One, two, three days slid away, and then we were in comring distance of Mars. I sent a message to my parents' address, telling them our estimated arrival date, praying that they still lived in the same place.

“So what is your family like?” said Ruea.

It was our last full day in space. I'd just perched myself on the third rung of the ladder in the engine room, and Ruea was well into her daily maintenance routine. I looked up at her, surprised.

Seeing my face, Ruea added, “I want to know what to expect when we get there.”

“Of course,” I said. “My mom's an astrophysicist, and my dad's a *shochet*—a butcher,” I explained when she looked at me strangely. It was so weird which words didn't translate. “My grandmother lives near us, ever since her wife passed away. I've got a little brother, too. He's—God, he's eighteen now. He was so little when I left.”

“Were you two close?” Ruea asked.

“Fairly. We fought, of course, but we were mostly allies. He's so much younger than me, though, so that made things strange.”

“I would've loved a brother,” Ruea said. “You're so lucky to have had a family growing up.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at my hands. “I guess I am.” A stab of guilt twisted in my stomach. “They'll like you,” I told Ruea. “They appreciate people who care about the universe around them.”

What I didn't say is, they probably won't like me anymore.

The rippling red landscape of Mars filled my viewscreen completely. To look at it, you would never know the planet was inhabited. All the colonies were underground, with only the doors to the spaceports visible from the air. Spires with blinking lights showed their

location. We sped over the red lights of Bradbury and past the green ones of Działka, and then finally, there was New Jerusalem, its dusty silver spires blinking blue.

I brought the Roadblock to a crawl, circling over the doors as slowly as I could while still keeping us in the air. The huge doors below us opened, spilling red sand over their edges. Just below it was a landing platform, painted with white concentric circles. I guided the Roadblock onto the platform, setting down as gently as I could, though the ship still jarred on the impact.

“We’re down,” I told Ruea.

“Finally.” The rumble of the ship cut off abruptly.

“If you want to see the docks, come up here.”

“On my way!”

The ship started to rumble again, not from inside, but from below. The lip of the door rose away above us, and for a moment, there was nothing out my window but darkness. Then, we cleared the door, and the bustling New Jerusalem ports came into view.

Ruea stepped into the cockpit and sat in the copilot chair, not saying a word. I watched her watch the ports, the dozens of ships of all sizes and colors sitting on platforms like ours, and between them, the people. More than half of them were Terran, but not much more. Down to our right, a group of Dystyi pulled tank after tank of green pulsing spheres from their cargo bay—some kind of fish. To our left, a Ysi man ran into the arms of a tall human guy, who spun him around. In the distance, a gate with an ornate iron Star of David marked the entrance to the city proper. Ruea took it all in, her eyes shining. She was beautiful like that, immersed, her mouth open and her whole body pressing forward.



At last, we came to a halt. I stretched, pulling my arms behind my back. Ruea pinned a universal translator to her shirt. Together, we made our way through the port towards the city gate. The gate was purely aesthetic, meant to evoke the gates of Old Jerusalem back on earth. Very convincing fake sunlight glinted off its shiny stone and iron sides. The air was a bit warmer than was pleasant, from all the spaceship exhaust, but as we neared the gate, the smell of cooking filled the air—fresh dill and parsley—and underneath it, the ever-present scent of goat.

People poured through the gate in both directions, but one person stood out. It was a boy in his late teens, leaning up against the gate, holding a handwritten sign that was too far away to read. He had light brown hair that curled over his ears, and he was wearing a sky blue kippah that matched his high-top sneakers. The slightest scruff of a beard was poking out of his chin. Something about him was familiar.

Ruea noticed the boy too. “Do you know him,” she asked, gesturing to the sign. Now that we were closer, I could see the words: “WELCOME HOME NAOMI.”

I blinked, momentarily unsure, and then called “Josh?”

The boy looked up, a grin splitting his face. “Naomi!” He pushed off the gate and ran toward me. I ran to him, too. We met in the middle, wrapping our arms around each other. I squeezed him to me, surprised to feel muscle in his arms where there had once been nothing but noodles. I held him at arm's length. “You're so grown up!”

“What, are you going to talk to me like an estranged aunt now? Of course I'm grown up!” But he was still smiling.

“Ruea,” I said, “this is my brother, Josh. Josh, this is Ruea, my...” I wasn't sure what to call Ruea.

“Her girlfriend,” she said, shaking Josh's hand. Josh's eyebrows shot up, and I could feel my face getting red, but he didn't make any comments about it. Not yet, at least.

“I came to greet you guys,” he said, by way of explanation, “and to help you carry your bags. But you don't have any?”

“It's all still on the ship,” I told him. “We weren't sure where we'd be staying tonight, and we didn't want to have to schlep our stuff all around the city.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Aren't you coming home?”

“Yes, but I didn't know if the parents would want me in the house. I didn't want to jump to any conclusions.”

“Of course we want you!” he said. “You're family! What are we going to do, leave you on the streets? Let's go get your things.”

We turned around, headed for the Roadblock again.

“Don't get me wrong,” Josh continued. “Ima and Aba are super pissed at you. Ima's beside herself, and Aba's been cooking all day—” I winced “—but that doesn't mean they hate you or something. Plus, the only thing that Ima's been talking about more than how she can't *believe* your behavior is the, um, friend you're bringing with you. You've been the topic of much speculation, Ruea.”

“I hope I meet their expectations,” said Ruea.

“Well, you're not a gunslinger, so you're already above average.”

Ruea and I shared a glance, and for a moment, I imagined what this would be like with Alllili by my side instead of Ruea. It wasn't the best image.

“So,” I said, “you're in your last year of high school, right? What do you plan to do next year?”

He gave me a look. “Estranged aunt, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah. What question should I ask, then?”

“Now *that* is a good question. Ask me about my book.”

“What book?”

“I’m writing a book. It’s about robots.”

Ruea said, “I like robots.”

“Here’s the ship,” I said.

Josh took in the battered hunk of metal that had been my home for nearly a year. “It’s really ugly, huh?”

I hit him on the arm.

“Ow!” he protested, and hit me back. “Let’s get your shit out of there before the whole thing collapses.”

Inside, Ruea disappeared into her room to pack.

“So,” said Josh, his eyes alight with mirth, “that’s your girlfriend?”

Here we go. “Yes. She is.”

“Don’t you know it’s not kosher to eat shellfish?”

It took me a second too long to understand what he meant. “Oh my God, Josh.”

“No, wait, I’ve got another one.”

“Please stop.”

“You know how she’s an engineer? Does that mean she’s good ‘belowdecks’?”

I buried my face in my hands. Josh cracked up, clutching the wall for support.

“That isn’t funny, you know,” I told him. “Sex is a normal part of adult life, and not a punchline for your adolescent humor.”

“Oh so you *are* banging, then?”

I went red in spite of myself. “That's none of your business.”

“You know, we've been apart for so long that I can't tell if you're embarrassed because I'm wrong or because I'm right.”

“I need to pack.”

“Yeah, okay.” Rolling his eyes, Josh sat down on my bed. I began to pull things out of drawers, starting with my duffle bag. “So,” continued Josh, “How did you two meet?”

When I didn't say anything, Josh added, “The parents are going to ask you anyway. I'm giving you a chance to practice.”

It was annoying, but he was right. “We met on a ship. I was the pilot and she was the head engineer.”

“What ship?”

“The Packmule. Standard transport ship. We shuttled goods between the planets in the Crustean system.”

Josh let out a low whistle. “You were all the way out to Crustea?”

“Yeah. I thought you would have guessed, with Ruea being Crustean and all.”

“I figured you met halfway, on Ys or somewhere. Crustea is *far*, Naomi.”

“Yup,” I said, stuffing T-shirts into my duffle. “When you run away, it doesn't make any sense to stay close.”

“Yeah.” Something caught in Josh's voice. I didn't pry. Growing up, Josh resented it when people tried to wheedle his feelings out of him.

The spaceport was attached to the old part of the city, which was built in the style of an ancient middle-eastern city on Earth. Specifically, it was supposed to look like Jerusalem, but since I'd never been there, I couldn't say how accurate it was. The street paved with brown, rippling stone that had been brought up from Earth, and the walls were made out of red rock that had formed the inside of this part of the planet, before it was carved up and turned into buildings.

Josh led us through the *souk*, the city's main market. Here, the red walls made up open-air stalls, from which spilled everything imaginable. One sold bolts of cloth, another glistening apples and pomegranates and bulbous blue shnarpises, and still another displayed viewscreens, flashing with photographs to show how high their image quality was. Parents carried small children on their hips or backs as they bartered for bread. Teenagers, just let out of school, clustered around a chocolatier. A man with a tremendous white beard and woman with silver-shot red hair brandished heavy-looking books as they argued companionably. Goats nibbled at the edges of everything. Many but not all of the people in the *souk* were human. Many but not all of them wore *kippot* or scarves on their heads. The strings of lights that lined the street and the scents of spices and leather and baking bread gave everything a carnival air.

Josh led us down a side street, out of the market proper and into a row of more substantial looking storefronts—cafes and bookstores and office buildings. Eventually, those too petered out, and we were in a quiet residential neighborhood. One more turn and we would be on my street. The thought made my stomach flip. Josh had never been especially good at reading our parents. He didn't have to be—he was a good kid.

Me, though, I'd had all their tones and facial cues down to a science, because I was not a good kid, and they were forever mad at me. At the time it had seemed unfair, but in hindsight, I'd had a bad habit of putting myself and other people in danger. And now, I had disappeared for five years, with only four or five letters to show I was still alive.

When Ima saw that I was safe, she was going to kill me.

And then, there it was—a house much like all the others, with red stone walls and deep set windows that had been sharply rectangular three hundred years ago and were now well on their way to becoming circular. The door was painted purple—the only obviously unique feature of the house. It was home.

Josh skipped to the door and pushed it open, tapping the turquoise and gold *mezuzah* as he passed. I followed him inside, but didn't touch it.

“Ima! Aba! Naomi's home!” Josh called. I pushed past him into the living room, and then stopped short. The furniture was all the same, but in different places. The dark blue couch had been between the windows when I left, but now it was pushed against the far wall, and the bookcase that used to be on the far wall was next to the door to the dining room. It was familiar and strange in a way that I couldn't quite express.

My mother came bustling out of the dining room, an uncertain expression on her face. She froze upon seeing me, just as I had on seeing the living room, and I knew she was seeing much the same thing that I had, the strange and the familiar layered on each other in my face.

“Hi, Ima,” I said, trying not to sound like I was being brought home by the police.

“Naomi,” she said, half statement and half gasp.

I made myself smile.

“Naomi,” she said again, louder, and rushed to me, throwing her arms around me. I hugged her back, burying my face in the softness of her shoulder. She smelled like pen ink and yeast and *home* and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from crying.

A pair of heavy feet stamped into the room. “Where is my daughter?” demanded a gruff, beard-muffled voice, and Ima let me go.

My father swept me up in a hug that lifted me clear off the floor. I laughed and clung to him, heart in my throat.

Aba set me down. I saw that he had been covered in flour, and now I was, too. His beard had gotten shockingly grey. Behind his beard, his face was glowing, but he tried hard to make it appear stern. “You have a lot of explaining to do,” he told me, and I nodded.

“I will,” I told him, and then, glancing over at Ima, I added, “I’m sorry.”

“I should say so,” she said. She was doing a much better job looking angry with me, so much better that I thought it might be true. “Who’s your friend?”

“Right. Um, Ima, Aba, this is Ruea. Ruea, these are my parents, Ms. Mandelbaum and Mr. Sedor.”

“I’m Naomi’s girlfriend,” Ruea said, extending a hand for them to shake. Her antennae twitched into a smile at the word “girlfriend,” and I have to admit, my mouth did the same.

“Call me Zohra,” said my mother, clasping her hand.

“Nathan,” said Aba, gesturing to himself. “Would you like something to eat? To drink?”

“Um, sure,” said Ruea.

Aba gestured for her to follow him and left the room. Ruea gave me quick, questioning glance, but followed him. They were trailed by Josh, looking for food or hoping to avoid confrontation, I wasn't sure which.

“So,” said Ima, when we were alone. “Why don't we sit down?” She sat on the couch. Her body suggested that she was relaxed but her mouth was a grim line.

My smile slid off my face. I sat down at the other end of the couch, tucking my legs under me. I waited for her to start talking, to start yelling, but she just sat there.

Finally, I repeated, “I'm sorry.”

“That's a good start,” she said.

“I should have told you I was safe. I should have called, or written more, or...” I trailed off, guilt making my throat tight.

“True,” she said.

“I just—at first, I didn't want you to try to get me, and then it had been so long that I *couldn't* contact you, because, I don't know, it didn't feel right.”

“I see.” Neither her voice nor her face betrayed any emotion. For some reason, that made me feel worse than if she'd been acting angry.

“And I know I shouldn't have run away in the first place. I'm sorry!” My voice broke, but I kept going. “I understand if you hate me. I won't stay here. I won't invade your life. I'm sorry.” I buried my face in my hands, mashing tears back into my eyes.

Ima took my wrists and gently pulled my hands away from my face. When I looked up, her nose was just inches from mine. “Did I ask you to become a martyr?” she asked.

“What?”



“Your wallowing in self pity won't do me any good,” she said. “What's done is done. What's important is that you don't do anything like it again.”

“I won't,” I whispered, barely audible.

She ran her fingers through my hair. “You're my daughter, Naomi. I'm not ever going to stop loving you. You've broken my trust, and it will take time to rebuild it, but if you put in the effort—oh, come here.” Her face softened as I began to sob, and she drew me to her, stroking my hair like when I was a little girl.

She let me stay there for several minutes, but when my sobs abated, she shifted to signify that I should sit up. I did, wiping tears from my face, lips drawn in a trembling smile.

“What you're going to do now,” she told me, “is apologize to your father and little brother. And none of this 'I understand if you hate me' *mishegas*. You tell them you're sorry you hurt them, you're sorry you were thoughtless, and you won't do it again. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now let's go get you some dinner. You look like you've been on spicer rations for months.”

Aba hadn't just been feeding Josh and Ruea snacks. There was a full meal laid out on the table: grilled goat chops smelling of garlic and oregano, steaming carrots flecked with dill, couscous with the pink Shlisian mushrooms Josh loved, and a bowl of crunchy looking grapes. I smiled ruefully—this is what happened when my father got anxious. Ruea was laying forks neatly on six napkins, while Josh walked behind her, doling out plates.

“Josh, fetch your grandmother for dinner,” Ima said as she walked into the room.

Josh stuck his head up the staircase. “Savtah!” he shouted.

Ima groaned. “Josh, 'fetch' and 'scream at' are not the same word.”

“They could be synonyms,” said Josh, but he ran up the stairs anyway.

Ima shook her head. “That boy,” she said, but she was grinning.

“Can I help?” I asked.

Aba came out of the kitchen carrying a cutting board laden with two fresh loaves of bread. “Yes,” he said, “you can fill the water glasses.”

I filled six glasses, by which time Josh had brought our grandmother Sheila downstairs and Aba had sliced the bread. It was studded with seeds.

“It’s *parve*,” he said, when he saw me looking at it.

It hadn’t even occurred to me to ask whether the bread had dairy in it or not—it’d been a long time since I’d paid attention to kashrut—but he was a kosher butcher. This sort of thing was always on his mind.

We took our seats. I ended up next to Ruea and across from Ima. Savtah took a swig from her water glass, set it down with a thud, stared straight at Ruea, and said, “So I guess you’re not Jewish then.”

I nearly choked on my couscous. I don’t know why I was surprised, she never had much of a filter, but I would have thought they’d exchange names first.

“Savtah,” Josh said, drawing out the vowels. “You can’t just make assumptions based on species like that!”

“I’m not actually Jewish,” Ruea said, “but I’m thinking of converting.”

This time it was Aba’s excellent goat chops that nearly choked me. “You are?”

She nodded. “I told you I’d been reading up about it.”

“Converting’s a big commitment,” Aba said, raising an eyebrow.

Ruea nodded. “I know. That's why I haven't made a decision yet. You can't base things like that off of reading an encyclopedia.”

Aba's eyebrow retreated to its usual place, and Ima smiled. I felt a surge of pride—she was impressing them.

“Where will you be staying?” said Savtah, a little snappish.

Ruea glanced down at her hands. “Um...”

Ima cut in. “We're making up the guest room for her,” she said, the tiniest bit snappish herself. “You two'll be neighbors. Won't that be fun?”

Chastened, Savtah grumbled something inaudible and stuck a forkful of carrots into her mouth.

“Thank you so much for letting me stay, Ms. Mandelbaum,” said Ruea.

“Zohra, please. You're welcome.”

“What do you do?” asked Aba.

“I'm an engineer,” said Ruea.

Ima grinned. “A fellow scientist! What kind of engineering?”

Ruea looked a little uncomfortable, but she said, “I studied mechatronics, but I mostly do practical engineering now. I run ships.”

“And I imagine that's how you met our pilot,” said Ima. “On a ship?”

“Yes, the Packmule, a freighter native to the Crustean system. That's where I'm from,” Ruea added as an afterthought.

“Thought so,” said Aba. “It's the antennae.”

Ruea reached up and touched an antenna. “That usually gives it away.”

“You know,” said Aba, “Your mother just made a new friend who's Crustean.”

“She’s stopping by tomorrow,” Ima said. “You should say hello to her.”

Savtah said to Ruea, “Maybe you know her?”

Ruea’s antennae pulled back into an awkward smile. “I mean, Crustea is a big system...”

“So what are your plans?” Ima asked, giving her mother a hard look.

“I’m going to try to get a job, probably planet-side, and go back to school. I—” Ruea glanced at me, and then at her plate, trying to figure out the best way to explain. “I never got to finish my degree, and I want to.”

“You’ll be at school at the same time as Josh, then!” said Ima. Josh grimaced, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“She’s probably not even going to be at the same school as me,” grumbled Josh, mashing his carrots into his couscous with the back of his fork.

“We’ll see where I get in,” said Ruea.

“She’s really smart,” I offered. “She probably saved our lives a thousand times on the way here without me even knowing.”

Ruea blushed purple. “I can’t take all the credit. You’re the reason we didn’t smash into any asteroids or drift into a sun.”

“Wait,” said Aba, “you two flew here? Just you two?”

We nodded, Ruea a little embarrassed, me a little smug.

“How?” Aba demanded.

“It wasn’t easy,” I said, my face twisting into a grimace to match Josh’s. “But we had a good engineer.

“And a good pilot,” Ruea said.

Ima smiled in a way that showed she thought we were cute and Savtah smiled in a way that showed she thought *we* thought we were cute. “Excuse me,” she said, and stormed up the stairs.

Ima sighed. “It’s a mystery to me why my sister didn’t want to take her.”

Josh snorted, and to my surprise, Ruea did too. She turned to me. “Has your grandma always been like that?”

“Yep,” I said. “She’s kind of... ornery?”

“A pain in the ass?” suggested Josh.

Ima whapped Josh lightly on the arm. “Don’t talk about your savtah that way!”

“I can’t help but notice that she finished her food before she left, though,” I added.

Ima smiled and reached across the table, lacing Aba’s fingers in hers. “Well, it was *very* good food.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Almost makes me glad I made you anxious!”

This was the wrong thing to say. The cheerful atmosphere was sucked from the air immediately. Ruea stared at her lap, Ima withdrew her hand, and Aba seemed to retreat inside his beard. Even Josh looked uncomfortable. After the silence had gone on past the point that even he was comfortable with, he said, “Is there any desert, Aba?”

“There’s ice cream in the freezer,” he said, but didn’t seem especially interested in it.

Ima said, “If you’re done, clear your space.” As Josh started heading for the kitchen, she called after him, “And put your dishes *through* the sanitizer, don’t just leave them on the counter!”

“I know,” Josh called back as he disappeared through the kitchen doorway.

Ima sighed. “I’ll go find you girls sheets. Naomi, will you help your brother in the kitchen?”

“Of course!” Chore-doing was probably the easiest part of rebuilding trust, and I wanted to make it clear that I was eager to get started.

“Ruea, dear, come with me. I’ll show you your room.”

I lay my bed, listening to the neighborhood go to sleep around me. People called goodnight to one another across the street. A door slammed. Lights flicked off, casting my old bedroom into deeper darkness.

The place looked almost exactly as it had when I’d left it. My posters were still on the walls— swirling nebulas and bands called Killwater and Plasma Poisoning and Ivanka Borleon, the best hoverboarder in the galaxy as of my sixteenth birthday. My desk still held school supplies, and when I’d checked my viewscreen, it still had all my music and angsty teenage poetry on it. A dusty acoustic guitar leaned in the corner. The dust was familiar too—I’d barely played it, even when I was living here. Ima had even dug out my old sheets, mint green and worn into coziness.

It was almost like nothing had changed. Once again, I had come home in trouble and been left to stew in my guilt. Once again, I’d brought home a girl who my parents liked better than me. Once again, I was confronted by what a bad daughter I was. I almost wished they *had* thrown me out. Then, at least, I could be angry. But they’d been measured and accepting, disappointed but not too surprised at my behavior, and the only person I could get mad at was me.

Still, I managed to fall asleep eventually. I woke to the artificial sunlight streaming through my bedroom window. Josh's music leaked from his room and into mine, and I could hear footsteps from Savtah's room above me. Downstairs, I heard the gentle clinking of dishes, strains of quiet conversation—including a voice that didn't belong to any of my family members.

I dressed and headed to the kitchen, meeting Ruea on the stairs. In the kitchen, the voices were clearer—one was my mother's, and the other was vaguely familiar, slightly tinny due to a discount translator.

"Who's your mom talking to?" Ruea asked.

I shrugged. "Must be that Crustean lady the parents were talking about. They said she was coming over today."

We peered into the living room like kids. There was Ima, sitting on the couch, a cup of tea in her hands. The woman sitting across from her was definitely Crustean—the reddish-purple exoskeleton and antennae were unmistakable. She was burly and broad, and had a spiderweb of healing cracks on the back of her head. This, too, was familiar. Had I known her back on Crustea?

Beside me, Ruea whispered, "Oh no."

"What?"

"That woman—we've seen her before. She's the pirate captain who attacked us back in the asteroid belt."

"Are you sure?" Now that I was looking, the scars on the woman's head did look like the ones Ruea left on the captain, but without seeing her face, I couldn't be certain.

Ruea took my hand. “Absolutely. She’s the first person I ever hit. I wouldn’t just forget.”

Ima finally noticed us hovering in the doorway. “Come in,” she called, “meet my friend!”

What choice did we have? Ruea and I trooped into the living room, and when Ima gestured to the couch, we sat down.

It was definitely her. Narrow eyes, wide shoulders, and antennae twisted into a perpetual smirk. Her expression didn’t change when she saw us.

“Geallia,” Ima said, “this is the daughter I was talking about—Naomi—and her girlfriend, Ruea.”

“A pleasure,” said the captain—Geallia. “Have we met before?” she asked, eyes on Ruea.

“I—I don’t think so.”

“And you’re the runaway daughter. How sweet you’ve come home, where everything is safe. You never can tell what’s coming, out in space.”

Ima said, “Geallia used to have her own ship, but she’s settled here for a change of pace.”

“New Jerusalem is such a nice little colony,” said Geallia.

“Ima,” I said, “Can I talk to you? In private?”

Ima blinked at me. “Sure.” She followed me up the stairs to the third floor. “What’s so secret?”

“Your friend Geallia is not a good person,” I told her.

“What are you talking about?”



“Ruea and I encountered her on our travels. She’s a pirate captain, and she almost sold us into slavery.”

Ima sucked her lower lip thoughtfully. “Are you sure it’s the same woman? Geallia is a kind woman—I can’t imagine her as a pirate.”

“I’m positive. Those scars on her head are from our fight, when we were escaping.”

“That’s a very serious accusation. I’ll have to go talk to her about it.”

“What is there to talk about? Get her out of the house!”

“If she is who you say she is, perhaps she’s changed her ways. We are to welcome the stranger, Naomi.”

When Ima starts pulling quotes from the Torah, there’s no arguing with her. Grumbling, I followed her back to the living room. Ruea looked stricken, but Geallia looked as composed and smug as ever.

“Geallia,” Ima said, “have you ever met my daughter before?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“She says you were a pirate captain, and that you attacked her.”

Geallia laughed. “A pirate captain? Me? Come now, can you imagine me, I don’t know, swashbuckling?”

“Not really, but people change.”

“Well, I wasn’t a pirate. I told you, I ran a freighter between Crustea’s moons before I moved here. However,” Geallia’s smile widened, “I finally remembered why I remember the name, Naomi Mandelbaum. There was a mercenary by that name who ran near Crustea, a pilot and killer for hire. That can’t have been you, can it?” Her black eyes bored into me, her antennae relaxed and smug.

I blinked at her. “No, it wasn’t.”

“Interesting. I heard she blew up a freighter called The Packmule. You ever hear of that ship?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“It exploded just before your mother got a note that you were coming home. Isn’t that odd?”

I glanced from Ruea’s panicked face to Ima’s confused one. “The Packmule blew up while I was on board,” I admitted, “but it wasn’t an act of sabotage or anything. Something in the engine broke, and nobody noticed the hazard lights until it was too late. I lost my job, and I decided to come home.”

“That’s not what I heard,” said Geallia. “I heard that Naomi Mandelbaum and a particularly unattractive Crustean accomplice blew the ship up to spite its captain. This is all rumor, of course, but they say she was spurned by the captain, and took her revenge.”

“That’s ludicrous!” I shot to my feet. “How dare you lie about me in my own house?”

Ima placed a firm hand on my wrist. “It’s not your house,” she said, her voice measured. “We do not shout at our guests, here. Perhaps you should take a walk around the neighborhood, to calm down.”

Ruea said, “She’s telling the truth, Ms. Mandelbaum! That woman is a pirate. She gave me this!” She pointed to the white line on her cheek.

Ima’s face was ice. “Naomi, show Ruea the grocery down the street. She should get her bearings if she’s going to stay with us.”

“But Ima—”

“Be home for dinner.”

What else could we do? We left, even though it made me sick to my stomach to leave my family alone with the pirate.

When we were out of earshot of the door, I turned to Ruea. “Did she say anything to you?”

Ruea nodded, eyes wide. “I asked her what she was doing here, and she said, ‘Just looking up old friends,’ with this awful grin on her antennae.”

“So we’re the old friends.”

“I assume so.”

“Why would she come all this way, just for us?”

“Well,” said Ruea, with the tiniest edge of a smile, “I imagine it’s not as long a journey when you don’t almost die every week or so.”

“I guess.” I raked my fingers through my hair. “If she’s here, that means she has a plan. Which means that *we* need a plan.”

“Her crew is probably here, too.”

“Yeah. Can we take all of them?”

“We have before!” Ruea nudged my arm. “We make a good team.”

Twenty minutes later, I decided it was safe to go back to the house. The front windows were dark, when we got there, despite the cheerful afternoon streets. “Ima!” I called, stepping inside.

No answer.

“Aba? Josh? Savtah?”

Ruea pushed past me. “Ms. Mandelbaum! Mr. Sedor!” She ran up the stairs.

No one was there. The downstairs was abandoned. Josh's room was silent. Even Savtah's perch on the top floor was empty.

*Oh no oh no oh no.* "Don't panic," I said to Ruea. "They're probably all just getting lunch or something."

"I'm not panicking," said Ruea. She took my hand. Only then did I realize it was shaking. "We'll get them back, I promise."

I let out a jagged breath. "You're right."

"Let's think about this. It would be a huge coincidence if they just left right after Geallia arrived, but it could happen. Would any of your neighbors have noticed?"

"Mx. Kolitz might have." I smiled weakly. "They caught me sneaking out so many times, the old busybody."

"You ask them. I'm going to look around here."

Having something productive to do made me feel a little better. Guilt and anxiety were still having a fistfight in my stomach, but my legs didn't shake too badly as I crossed the street to the Kolitz house.

Mx. Kolitz didn't open the door until I'd knocked twice. They were smaller than I remembered them being, bent and shriveled with age, but with a brightness to their brown eyes that was all-too familiar.

"Naomi!" they said when they saw me. "Your mother said you were coming home."

"Hi. Yeah, actually, have you seen my mother at all today? She's not home."

Mx. Kolitz considered. "I've been cooking most of the morning, but there was a rental transport outside your house for a while. She might have left in that."

“Thanks! Do you remember anything about the transport? Was it one of the big public ones or?”

“No, it was little, couldn’t have fit more than six people. It was blue, I think. Why? Is there a problem?”

“I hope not,” I told them. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“You be good to your parents, now. I’m sure you’re grown enough to know, but they don’t deserve any more grief from you.”

“I will!” I flashed her a smile that I hoped was convincing and ran for my house.

“Stop by for tea sometime!” They called after me.

I burst into the house. “Ruea! I have information!”

She leaned out of the kitchen. “Tell me!”

I told her.

“How do you know it was a rental? Geallia might have her own transport.”

“They’re all rentals, here, unless she’s incredibly rich. You can walk or take a bus almost everywhere in the colony, so personal transports are super rare.”

“Does that help us?”

“Maybe. There might be only a few services that have blue transports, and we could claim that we’d been jacked, and get it traced.”

“That’s an idea,” said Ruea, “but I was thinking—there’s probably an easier solution than that.”

“What? Why?”

“Like you said, Geallia has a plan. She’s been friends with your mother for weeks, but she waited until now to do anything. The only difference is us. Which makes me think she wants us to find her. It’s some kind of power trip or something.”

“Right! That’s why she was so calm when we accused her of being a pirate. She wasn’t going to stay undercover any longer.”

“Exactly!”

“So did you find any clues?”

Ruea’s antennae twisted into a grimace. “Not yet. I’ve looked all over the downstairs.”

“I’m going to look, too. I don’t doubt you or anything, but after eighteen passovers here, I know all the hiding places. I always found the *afikomen*.”

While Ruea searched the upstairs, I went over the living room in as much detail as I could. I opened every book, checked behind every pillow, felt the insides of the lampshades. It wasn’t until I was pulling cushions off the couch that I found it. It might have been nothing—just a scrap of paper lost in the couch—but it was right where Geallia had been sitting.

“Ruea!” I called. “Come look at this!”

As she clattered down the stairs, I unfolded the paper. It was thick, almost cloth-like, and the ink had bled into the fibers, but the words were clear.

*You lost me my family. Your turn.*

*Ozick x Piercy*

“Ozick ex Piercy?” Ruea asked, peering over my shoulder.

“It’s an address. Ozick and Piercy are both streets. C’mon.” I dashed into the kitchen and grabbed one of Aba’s knives from the counter. “Let’s catch a pirate.”

It was lunchtime, and the streets in the northern part of the city were clogged with people. I kept the knife hidden inside my jacket as we pushed through the crowd. Food smells poured from storefronts, and I regretted my lack of breakfast, but I couldn’t allow myself to get distracted. Ruea and I pushed our way down Ozick to where it dead-ended at Piercy. There was a park, there, with the massive tree planted by the founders, a restaurant, and a store that sold greeting cards and fancy pens. The park didn’t seem like a good place to hide someone, let alone four someones, so I turned to the businesses.

“We’ll have to check them both,” I said. “Should we split up?”

“Definitely not,” said Ruea. “We’ll look together. Restaurant first?”

“You got it.”

The restaurant was called YOFI, and it was apparently very popular. I shoved my way past the waiting line, ignoring the worried-looking hostess who called after me. I turned in a circle, scanning the faces—and froze. There, in a booth, eating happily, was my family, and with them, Geallia.

“Ima!” I called, my voice breaking with relief. “Aba! Josh! You’re okay.”

They turned.

Ima said, “Naomi? What are you doing here?”

Josh said, “Of course we’re okay.”

“She’s not worried about me,” muttered Savtah to no one in particular.

The panic drained out of me, leaving me empty. I sagged against the side of the booth. “I thought you’d been kidnapped.”

“Why would we have been kidnapped?” asked Aba.

Geallia said, “This is just what we were talking about. Trauma like that can cause paranoia.”

“I’m not paranoid! You left me a note!”

“Where is this note?” Ima asked.

“Here!” I pulled the note from my pocket, only to discover that the text had dissolved into an unreadable blue mess. “I promise, it said to come here! Ruea saw it. Ruea!”

Ruea emerged from the crowd, followed by the hostess. “You found them!” she gasped, at the same time that the hostess said, “Miss, I have to insist that you—”

“It’s okay,” said Gaellia. “They’re with us.”

“We didn’t mean to scare you,” said Aba, with a smile. “Come eat! There’s room.”

My stomach curdled. “Leave my family alone,” I said to Gaellia.

Her antennae bent into an even bigger smile. “Naomi, I know this has been hard for you—”

“I’m not traumatized!” I shouted. “I’m not paranoid! Ima, Aba, you have to believe me. She’s going to hurt you.”

People were staring at me, now. My parents shared a glance. Aba said, “Maybe we should talk about this outside.” His voice was too gentle.

Ruea touched my arm. “They seem safe for now,” she whispered. “Let’s leave.”

“Okay. I’m going.” I wiped my eyes with the heel of my palm and turned back into the crowd.

Aba followed Ruea and me out of the restaurant and into a relatively quiet patch of park. “What’s going on?” he asked.



I told him the same thing I'd told Ima, with Ruea interjecting every so often. When I finished, he wrapped his arms around me. "Ah, my darling. This must have been so hard for you."

I nodded into his chest.

"We're going to get this figured out, I promise."

"So you believe me?"

He hesitated.

"Aba!"

"I believe that you see this pirate captain when you look at Geallia, but you said yourselves that you never got the woman's name. She's been a great support to your mother—to both of us—in the last few weeks, since we heard you were coming home. It's hard to imagine a woman like that being some kind of criminal."

"But Aba—"

"I'm not saying you're wrong, just that I need more information. And you need to rest." He put a hand on my shoulder in a way that I was sure was meant to be comforting. "You've had a hard journey. You both have," he added with a smile at Ruea. "Go home. Sleep, eat, heal. Your mother and I can take care of ourselves. And no one can pull anything over on your Savtah."

"I really think that—"

"See you after lunch," Aba said. He kissed my forehead, and disappeared back into the lunch crowd.

Ruea said, "What do we do now?"

I sat down on the grass and put my head in my hands. “I don’t know. Maybe we don’t do anything.”

“What? But she’s—”

“Are you absolutely sure?” I looked up into Ruea’s black eyes. “Do we really know it’s her? Maybe they’re cousins or something. Maybe I am just being paranoid.”

Ruea sat down in front of me. She took my hands in hers, and leaned towards me, one of her antennae lightly tracing my hairline. “Naomi, you’re not being paranoid. I know it can be hard when people you love don’t—” She let out a sharp breath, unable to continue.

I squeezed her hands.

She tried again. “I spent too many years letting people—letting Emi—tell me that my perceptions were wrong, that I was wrong for seeing the world the way I did. It hurts, but you can’t let it define you, or you’ll lose yourself. If you can’t trust your own eyes, what can you trust?”

“It has to be her,” I said. “Why would she leave that note, otherwise?”

“Exactly. We just can’t underestimate her again.”

I groaned and lay back on the grass. It was actually a kind of nice day out. The big lights embedded in the ceiling gave everything a golden afternoon glow, and the slight breeze made the leaves of the Founder’s Tree rustle. “I wish I knew what to do.”

“I hate to say it,” said Ruea, lying down beside me, “but I think your dad might be right. We need to rest, regroup. I for one have still been getting headaches from the oxygen deprivation, and you just came out of a panic attack.”

I stared up at the lights. My arms felt heavy and empty at the same time. “Maybe you’re right. Let’s go home.”

I woke from my nap with a pounding headache. Moments later, I realized that something else was pounding, too—someone was knocking on my door.

“Who is it?” I called.

“Josh!”

“Come in.” I let myself collapse back onto the bed.

“Tell me what’s going on,” he demanded, sitting down in my desk chair. “Ima and Aba won’t say anything to me.”

I repeated the story a third time. It was starting to sound rehearsed.

“Shit,” Josh said when I’d finished. “And the parents don’t believe you?”

“Why should they? I’m not a trustworthy source.”

“I guess. How can I help?”

“I don’t know if you can.” I lay my arm over my eyes. “Unless you’ve got a sniper blaster in your room.”

He let out a soft chuckle. “No, nothing like that.” And then, after a moment, “would you know what to do with one, if I did?”

“Probably not. I’ve only used standard models.”

“But you have shot blasters.”

“Yeah.”

He let out a breath. “I can’t even imagine that.”

“That’s for the best. Hey,” I propped myself up on one elbow. “Here’s something that might help—what has Geallia been telling Ima? Like, how did they become friends?”

Josh thought for a moment. “I don’t know how they met. She just sort of showed up a couple weeks ago. They complain together, and they drink tea.”

“What does Geallia complain about?”

“Space. How hard it is, how traumatic it was, how much her therapist says she has to overcome.”

“Hmm.” I’d never thought of space that way. Sure, I’d gone through my share of near-death experiences, but that was due mostly to my being stupid. It wasn’t space’s fault.

“Do you think she was setting you up?”

I lifted my head. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if she’s trying to say you’re paranoid, what better way to plant it than to play up how psychologically damaging your travels were?”

“When did you get so smart?”

“I was always smart,” he said, but he looked away when he said it.

“Josh.” I sat up and grabbed his hand. “I’m sorry I missed so much of your life. I promise I’m going to be here from now on.”

“Unless you get killed by the pirate lady.” His voice didn’t quite manage to sound jovial.

The next afternoon, Ima called up the stairs, “We’re going out, Naomi! Josh, are you ready?”

“Where are we going?” yelled Josh.

I could almost hear Ima roll her eyes. “To dinner with Geallia!”

“Can I stay home?”

“Not tonight.”

There was a pause. “Let me get my shoes.”

I stuck my head down the stairs. “I’m not invited?”

Ima gave me a look. “If you wanted to come, perhaps you shouldn’t have yelled at her in a restaurant.”

I put up my hands. “Fair enough.”

Josh almost ran into me, rushing out of his room. He put a finger to my lips when I opened my mouth, and tapped the pen in his shirt pocket twice. Then he pushed past me and scrambled down the stairs. Savtah emerged from the third floor and followed him, barely sparing me a glance. I stood there on the landing, watching them leave.

Ruea joined me on the landing. “Do you think they’re in danger?”

“Yes,” I said, “but last time... I don’t know.”

She sighed.

“At least Josh is on our side. I think he tried to tell me something, but fuck if I know what it is.”

“What did he do?”

“He, like, tapped his pen at me. Who even wears a pen in their shirt, anyway?”

Ruea’s antennae snapped up. “Does your brother use a scriv?”

“A what?”

“It’s a writing thing. It turns your handwriting into text. Artists use it too.”

“I don’t know. It sounds like something he might have, though. Why?”

“The pen!” Ruea was almost too excited to speak. “People kept losing the pens so they added this thing to let you track them—I’ll show you.” She pushed into Josh’s room.

I followed her in. The place was a wreck—piles of laundry on the floor, old stuffed animals turning to sediment in the corners—but the bed was clear, and on the comforter sat a broad datapad with a thin sleeve on one side.

“There it is,” Ruea said. She turned on the pad. The screen lit up, displaying the words:

*ENTER PASSWORD \_ \_ \_ \_ \_*

Ruea swore.

“Give it to me,” I said. I typed in his birthday. Wrong. I typed in the name of the goat we’d had as children—Shlomo. Wrong. Another line of text appeared:

*After three false attempts, device will lock.*

“I have an idea,” Ruea said. She took the pad and carefully typed R O B O T S.

The pad opened.

“That boy,” I said under my breath, but I was grinning.

Ruea tapped an icon labeled “Where the \*\*\*\* is my pen” (I suspected Josh had renamed it) and a map of the city appeared, with a white dot on our house and a red dot moving down the street. She pointed. “That must be them. We can see if they go anywhere suspicious.”

I shook my head. “The two of you are brilliant.”

Ruea went delicately purple. When she spoke, though, it was to say, “Can we wait in your room? It smells like teenage boy in here.”

“You got it.”

The problem was, they didn't go anywhere suspicious. The red dot stopped in a perfectly respectable dinner place in a busy part of the city. We sat and waited, Ruea fiddling with the scriv, me sorting through my old t-shirts to see if any still fit. We were still sitting like that when we heard the door open.

Ruea swiped back to the map, but the dot was still downtown.

"Aba? Are you back early?" I called.

A laugh wafted up from downstairs, one that definitely didn't belong to my parents.

"Geallia!" I dashed out to the landing, Ruea on my heels. "What did you do to my family?"

Geallia's flat black eyes stared up at me from the dark living room. It was incredible how eyes that similar to Ruea's could be so empty of warmth. "Don't worry, little pilot, your family is safe. In fact, when I left them, they were about to go get ice cream."

"What are you doing here?" Ruea demanded. She was still clutching the scriv to her chest.

Geallia continued as though she hadn't spoken. "What a shame their nice night will be ruined when they find their house trashed and their daughter gone. They really think you've changed, Naomi. They'll be so *disappointed*. But then, that's what happens when you trust people."

I felt the pocket of my jacket. The knife was still there. "Why are you doing this to us? What did we do to you?"

Geallia spat on the floor. "You lost me my crew. They turned on me—didn't think I was fit to lead if I'd been beaten by a two-person crew, see. They were my family." There

was a glint of silver, and then she was pointing a blaster at us. “A family for a family seems fair.”

“Down!” I shouted, throwing myself to the floor. Ruea landed beside me just as the picture frame on the wall behind us shattered.

I tucked my feet under me and half-slid down the stairs, whipping my knife out. I smashed into her legs, knocking her off balance. She fired again, at random, and the lightbulb burst, showering us with glass and darkness.

I stabbed the crease between her knee plates. She screamed and kicked, knocking the knife from my hand and sending it spinning into the dark. I lunged upwards, grasping for the gun, but she smashed it across my face, and I fell back. The world went fuzzy for a second, and when I touched my nose, my fingers came away wet.

With a scream, Ruea launched herself at Geallia, nearly tripping over me in the process. The two staggered into the living room, knocking into a bookshelf. Ruea had her hands around Geallia’s throat, but Geallia slammed her fingers into the soft plating under Ruea’s chin, and she let go with a cry.

I scrambled to my feet, casting around for something, anything to use as a weapon. Geallia fired again, and this time, her bolt found its mark. My shoulder exploded in pain. I shrieked and fell to the floor, tears springing to my eyes. I couldn’t move my hand. I couldn’t breathe. Everything was pain.

Something cold touched my forehead. I didn’t have to look up to know it was Geallia’s blaster. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll take good care of your family for you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, heart breaking from the *unfairness* of it all. To come all this way and die in my own living room—how could this happen?



*Crash!* The blaster left my forehead, and I opened my eyes. Geallia lay spread-eagled on the floor, blaster limp in her hand. Over her stood Ruea, holding a heavy frying pan. “I figured it worked last time,” she said, gazing down at the woman’s shattered head.

For a moment, I just stood there, staring at Ruea’s heaving chest, at the still form on my living room floor. Finally, I said, “Is she dead?”

“Who cares? She was going to shoot you.”

I gaped at her. “I care. I don’t want you to be a killer, Ruea.”

Ruea shrugged, but in her hand, the frying pan was shaking.

I scooted over to Geallia’s body, wincing every time my wounded shoulder moved. I took her wrist, and felt a pulse. “She’s alive.”

Ruea’s shoulders slumped. She sat down heavily on the couch. “I think maybe I cared a little bit.”

At that moment, the front door burst open. “—won’t be anything wrong, Josh,” Ima was saying. Then she froze. “What happened here?”

“Ima!” I breathed, staring up at her. “I—”

“I’ll explain everything,” Ruea said, springing to her feet.

Aba said, “I’ll call a med transport.”

While he did that and Ruea ran up the stairs, Ima and Josh came to kneel beside me. Ima placed a hand on my shoulder, near the puckered burn from the blaster. I winced and pulled away.

Ruea said, “Here, I was able to record everything. Thanks for the scriv, Josh.”

He grinned.

She had taken an audio recording of the whole fight, from right after Geallia walked in. My family listened with growing horror as she explained her plan. When the first blaster shot went off, Aba went white, and Ima pressed her fingers to her lips. Ruea stopped the audio. “You don’t need to hear the rest.”

Josh said, “I told you she was telling the truth!”

Aba stoked my hair. “You were right,” he said, very quietly.

“I never liked that Crustean, anyway,” said Savtah, with even more bitterness than usual.

Ima was crying. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I wanted to tell her that I understood, that I forgave her, but words felt very far away.

Outside, blue whirling lights appeared. I was lifted onto a stretcher. Beside me, I would see two men doing the same to Geallia’s limp form. Someone said, “Don’t worry, it’s treatable,” and someone else, maybe my father, said “We’ll meet you there,” and then I was carried out into the street and onto a medical transport.

Two people moved into my field of vision. I looked up to see Ruea on one side, and Ima on the other. They held my hands all the way to the hospital.

“Do you think it’ll fit up the stairs?” asked Ruea, worried.

I looked at the mattress that Aba and Josh were trying to wrangle through the living room. The whole thing looked unlikely, but the one in my parents’ room must have made it up there, somehow. “I think they can figure it out. Maybe we should help, though.”

It took all of us, plus Ima, to squeeze the double mattress up the stairs and into my room. I’d redecorated—Ivanka Borleon was still on the wall, but now, so was the still of my

old crew back on Triasmus, and the embroidered vest Ruea had brought from Crustea. My dusty guitar had been replaced with a second desk, stocked full of Ruea's new textbooks. The empty double bedframe stood waiting in the middle of it all.

With a tremendous thunk, Josh tipped the mattress onto it. I thought I'd cleaned pretty well, but a whole plume of dust exploded around it. Ima tossed me our new sheets—dark blue, dotted with stars—and left Ruea and me to put it on.

When we finished, she said, "Now it's *our* room."

"You're a part of the family," I told her.

"Not officially."

"All in due time." I just had to find a jeweler in the colony who made rings for Crusteans.

She kissed me, antenna on lips, and then stepped away. "I'm going to be late for class."

"Do you have to go?"

"Yes." But she kissed me one more time before running out the door.

I sat cross-legged on my new bed. I could hear my family talking downstairs, and beyond that, the sounds of New Jerusalem, the clanging and shouting and singing. I felt a smile steal over my lips

I was home.

Supplementary Discourse: Writing *The Book of Naomi*

It was spring of my Freshman year, about two weeks before I decided to drop my Biology major and about two weeks after I should have decided to drop it. I was sitting in Intro to Evolutionary Biology, but my mind was not on my work. Walking to class, I'd had a stray thought, and I couldn't get it out of my head. The thought was this: Red is the color of emergencies because it is the color of blood, and the color of fire. Imagine, then, that you had an alien who was something like a lobster, a crustacean with blue blood, and imagine that they lived on a planet with heavy salt deposits, turning their fire blue. That alien would think of blue, not red, as the color for emergencies. And bam! I had the inciting incident, a human pilot not noticing a blue warning light until it was too late.

I began scribbling ideas in the margins of my notes. By the time class was over, Naomi and Ruea's characters had names, vague personalities (Han Solo but less competent, Kaylee from Firefly but less manic), and a goal: getting back home. I had also realized that my characters' names were similar to Ruth and Naomi's, and rather than changing them, I decided to lean into it, and make my space opera a retelling. I had a novel, and it wasn't even lunchtime.

Before that morning, I did have some sense of what my thesis was going to be. I was writing a novel--how could I do otherwise? Because at the time I was double majoring in English and Biology and minoring in Women's Studies, I had already decided that this novel was going to be self-consciously feminist, and also science fiction. This concept didn't just reflect my academic goals but my personal values--science fiction and fantasy, feminist thought, and a love of words formed my childhood backdrop. Despite that, however, I realized that as a freshman in college, I had read almost no feminist science fiction. Feminist

fantasy? Absolutely. Vaguely Marxist or otherwise leftist sci fi? Sure. But beyond *The Handmaid's Tale* and, arguably, the works of Madeleine L'Engel, my understanding of the subgenre was basically nonexistent.

So, I made myself a reading list. Google searches introduced me to the classics-- Ursula K. LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Charlotte Perkins Gilman--and my family, friends, and professors added a few more. I deliberately left my list flexible, so although I never managed to get my hands on *A Door Into Ocean*, I made up for it with recent releases like *Earth Girl* and *The Long Way to A Small Angry Planet*.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist Science Fiction**

Through my reading, I found that there are three kinds of stories likely to be labeled “feminist.” The first route involves horrifically misogynist worlds, where the women begin to fight back. Excellent examples of this type of story include *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the *Native Tongue* series by Suzette Haden Elgin, *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley, and the early parts of Tamora Pierce's bibliography. These are the stories of rebellious princesses, of women who don male clothing and go to war in disguise. In science fiction, they are almost always dystopias, though they may be set in the past as well.

The second route is interested in deconstructing what exactly gender *means*. The world Ursula K. LeGuin creates in *The Left Hand of Darkness* has inhabitants who, by default, have no gender, and only acquire sexual organs of any kind when they reproduce, something deeply alien to the human male protagonist. Both *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Ammonite* by Nicola Griffith depict societies in which there are only women--the first as a kind of utopia, and the second more complexly. *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

tried this, too, in the season five episode “The Outcast.” These are idea-driven stories--they have plots and strong characters, certainly, but they are mostly interested in understanding the nature and purpose of gender.

The third route is comparatively hard to spot. These stories are set in worlds where sexism is largely over, where women can take positions of power and be fully realized, complex characters. *A Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* by Becky Chambers and *Earth Girl* by Janet Edwards both fall into this category, as does *He, She, and It* by Marge Piercy, most of the time. Of course, not every story that depicts a future with ostensible gender equality is can be called feminist. For example, the *Red Rising* trilogy by Pierce Brown has multiple complex women in positions of power, but all of them take on masculine-coded roles (warrior, politician, ect), while people who take on feminine roles or traits are universally dismissed as weak and unimportant, regardless of the character’s gender. Though it is a progressive series in a lot of ways, it is not feminist.

When I began thinking about the kind of story I wanted to tell, I knew I would have to choose between these three approaches. Initially, I assumed I would be writing the first kind, since it is the most obviously feminist. However, that didn’t quite fit my concerns and my writing style. Once I began to uncover my plot, I realized that the third kind of story was the only one that made sense for me. I wanted to depict a world where women, Jews, and queer people were powerful, dynamic, good/evil/morally gray--fully realized people. As much as I value the perspective dystopian fiction can bring, I didn’t want to write about oppression. I didn’t want to deconstruct identity as a concept. I wanted to write about empowerment. I wanted to bring hope.

This was true even before the election, but in the current political climate, bring joy and positivity, I felt, became increasingly important. Victoria Schwab, one of my personal favorite writers, posted the following to twitter the night of the election: “I will get up tomorrow and write about a world where monsters are slain.” That tweet became my personal call to action. I would not deny the existence of the monsters, but I would create worlds and scenarios in which the monsters are slain.

### **Other Influences**

*The Book of Naomi* wears its influences on its sleeve. The two biggest ones, outside the genre of specifically feminist science fiction, are the science fiction television shows, *Firefly* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In terms of tone and aesthetic, it’s hard to imagine two shows being more different, yet both have had a tremendous impact both on me as a person and on my book. From *Firefly* I get my fascination with the fringes of a future society, the criminals, the mundane, run-down, day-to-day life. I get the breaking ships, the tiny crews, and characters who make jokes to hide their vulnerabilities. From *Star Trek*, I get a reckless sense of optimism, characters who genuinely respect and try to understand one another, even when they can’t, and a universe full of ideas--full of allegory and metaphor and creative concepts. From both, I stole the planet-of-the-week structure and infatuation with the stars.

Beyond that, the *Star Wars* films had influenced my aesthetic significantly, and I often describe Naomi as a Han Solo-type who is even worse at it than Han Solo is. If there is anything scary about the book, I owe it to Jeff Vandermeer’s incredible tension-building in his phenomenal novel, *Annihilation*. But as important as these works were to me, there is one that has more influence over this book than any science fiction story.

*The Book of Naomi* is a loose retelling of *The Book of Ruth* from the Torah, but it borrows less from the text itself than from the culture surrounding it. Much of *The Book of Ruth* is taken up with property law--the story of camaraderie and love that has influenced the popular consciousness covers barely a third of the text. The music written about Ruth and Naomi had a much bigger impact on me when creating the tone and plot of the book. The Jewish folk song that I use as an epigraph emphasizes the equality of their partnership: "Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow./Don't walk in back of me, I may not lead./Just walk beside me and be my friend/and together we'll walk in the way of HaShem." The song "Ruth and Naomi" by Jewish singer/songwriter Linda Hirshorn also made a major impact: with its sweeping vocals and emphasis on the line, "I'll sleep with you," it is probably the reason I read the story as romantic rather than familial.

I felt empowered to retell this sacred story because of the Jewish tradition of *Midrash*, of interrogating, reinterpreting, and retelling holy texts. Some *midrashim* have become ingrained in tradition, to the point that it is almost canonical itself, while other stories remain simply stories. I had strong contemporary examples of creative *midrashim* growing up, particularly the anthology *Lilith's Ark* by Deborah Bodin Cohen and the young adult novel *Pharaoh's Daughter* by Julius Lester. *Lilith's Ark* retells the stories of the women of Genesis in a specifically feminist way, with deep compassion for the struggles of these girls coming of age and learning to handle jealousy, marriage, and sex. It was perhaps a bit fleshy for me when I first got it at thirteen, but by the time I was fifteen or sixteen I found it deeply inspiring. *Pharaoh's Daughter* is a very odd reimagining of the story of Exodus, which added characters and changed the way Moses got his name. In the introduction to the book, the author discusses talking to his Rabbi during his conversion, and the Rabbi telling him that



making up stories about the Torah was not only allowed, but encouraged. Even at eleven or twelve, I remember thinking, “If he can do it, why can’t I?”

Formative as those retellings are, they still keep their stories in the time and place where they originated. *The Book of Naomi* does not. The sort of unconventional retelling I did transplants the characters and ideas from the ancient Middle East to Outer Space of the future. I first encountered the idea of this time-space transplantation in a film called *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, a comedic retelling of *The Odyssey* set in Great Depression-Era America. The parallels are easy to spot if one is looking, but the movie doesn’t concern itself with being a one-to-one remake of its source material. Neither does *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray, which reframes Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* as a story about a modern teenager slowly succumbing to Mad Cow Disease (it’s more fun than it sounds). *Going Bovine* was also the first proper road trip story I’d read, and so influenced me in its structure and pacing, as well.

More obviously relevant to my novel are the novel *He, She, and It* by Marge Piercy and the webshow *Carmilla*. *He, She, and It* uses archetypes from Jewish folklore, specifically Golem stories, and pushes them to the future, making the Golem and android and the anti-semitic violence hacking rather than villagers with guns or shovels. It also centers itself on female characters, including queer women, although the main romance is between the female protagonist and the male-presenting android. The *Carmilla* webshow only brings its characters to the modern day, but it takes the homophobic tropes of Le Fanu’s classic novel and flips them on their heads. In this story, Carmilla is not a predatory lesbian destroying the innocent Laura, but is in a consensual, if complicated, relationship with Laura, upending a stereotype that persists to this day. *The Book of Ruth* is not an inherently homophobic text the

way the original *Carmilla* novel is, but making the characters openly queer is still subversive, and bringing it to the future allows the queerness to be unquestioned.

### **The Writing Process**

Not every future leaves room for queerness, and so I had to deliberately construct a world in which Naomi, Ruea, and their story would make sense. For me, worldbuilding as a process is not separate from the writing process--they feed into one another. Sometimes, I will want to include a scene or plot point (say, a fight in zero-g with a ball of water and a meeting with Ruea's ex) and construct a setting around it (say, a space mall and The Expanse). Other times, I put my characters into a setting I find compelling (say, Triasmus) and invent a plot to fit the place.

George R. R. Martin has been credited for articulating two types of writers: the architect and the gardener. The architect has everything planned out before they begin writing--every scene, every character trait, every setting. The gardener starts with one aspect, maybe a character or an opening line, and simply starts writing, finding their story as they go. I have never felt like I fit in this dichotomy. I call myself a "treehouse builder." I need some kind of blueprint for my stories before they begin, but I also allow them to change as I go.

*The Book of Naomi* changed quite a bit over the course of two drafts. While writing the first draft between November 2015 and July 2016, I added two sections--the parts with the lost planet and the monster on the ship--and dropped one, in which Naomi and Ruea solved a murder in a hoverboarding rink. This was originally where Ruea's ex-girlfriend Emilia was introduced, but I dropped it halfway through writing it because it did not actually make any sense. Even without that section, the first draft of *The Book of Naomi* was upwards of 78,000 words, more than fifteen thousand words longer than its current form.

I wasn't sure what to do with the great mass of raw material that was my first draft--I had never successfully revised anything as long or complex. After reading innumerable online writing advice posts, I decided to re-outline my novel on a series of index cards, one for each section. I divided the cards in half, writing on the right sides the major plot points for each part, and on the left, the impact these developments would have on the characters, their relationship, and the overarching plot. I had long since been introduced to the difference between "plot" and "story," but I didn't internalize it until this process--I was writing the plot of the novel on the right and the story on the left.

This new roadmap, though incomplete (it was full of question marks and still did not have the ending I would eventually use), gave me the confidence to begin the process of rewriting. I cut Naomi and Ruea's getting together and immediately breaking up in section three, a number of extra worldbuilding elements that went nowhere in Triasmus, and a bizarre revolution sequence in the part with Sustainer's cult, along with thousands of words of boring or awkward prose. I also made an effort to make Naomi react like herself and not like me, a trap that was easy to fall into since the book is written in the first person. This meant a lot of small changes throughout, but a few dramatic ones, too. In particular, when Naomi kills Rochester, she went into shock in the first draft. This is completely out of character for the pragmatic and mildly ruthless Naomi, so in the second draft, she reacts coolly, and Ruea is the one who panics.

I did add a few things in the second draft, most notably the section in the space mall. Since the hoverboarding mystery was scrapped, I needed to come up with a new story to introduce Emilia and break up the fairly similar sections in the first half of the book. I also completely rewrote the end of the book to make it tie in with the rest of the novel and display

the character development better (although I may need to write a third ending for the next draft. As it stands, the novel is not finished, but it is light years better than that first draft.

***The Book of Naomi, Now***

*The Book of Naomi* is an episodic novel, meaning it is made up of smaller stories that do not stand on their own, but still each include their own rising action, climax, and resolution. Together, they create a broader narrative about the relationship between Ruea and Naomi, and their growth as people.

The structure allowed me to play with genre a bit. Although the entire novel is a science fiction road trip story, individual sections pull aspects from other genres. The part with cannibalistic millionaire Hindley Rochester takes its tone and setting from the gothic novel, with Rochester's name being a direct reference to two of the most important works by the Bronte sisters. The section with the abandoned spaceship uses the tropes of space horror, like the movie *Alien*, and The Sustainer is a sendup of the kinds of dystopias that have been popular in the Young Adult genre for the last ten years. The part set on Triasmus was originally conceived as a kind of Western, but it drifted away over the course of the writing and revising process.

Ultimately, the main theme of the novel is autonomy in relationships--how much do we give up or change about ourselves to make a relationship work, and how much do we cling to our autonomy? How much do we accept others' flaws, and how much do we ask them to change for us? Although Naomi and Ruea are romantically attracted to one another from page one, they cannot be in a relationship, because they both have disordered relationships with autonomy that they have to work through before they are compatible with one another.

Naomi wants absolute autonomy from her relationships, which is why she ran away from home when her parents wanted her to go to college, didn't hesitate to kill her friend's lover, and abandoned Allili without a second thought. Ruea, meanwhile, allowed her relationship with Emiliae define her identity completely, giving up her friends and studies to make her happy. Many of the obstacles they face are related to this thematic conflict. Rochester, the speciesist cannibal, demands complete autonomy from social norms, and so lives his life on a fringe planet, away from most other people. At the same time, though, he demands that the people who work for him relinquish their own autonomy. The Sustainer believes she can only bring harmony to the people in her cult by denying them their freedom, which she accomplishes via drugs and brainwashing. The backstory sections depict how Ruea and Naomi have responded to relationships in the past, while the sections that are just Naomi and Ruea interacting show them growing into each other, learning how to respect their own and each other's sense of self while still accommodating the other's needs.

There's a lot of discussion of killing in this book, but ultimately, this is not a story about the ethics of taking a life. Killing is the most dramatic place where Naomi and Ruea must learn to respect and accommodate one another, because it is the point on which their values most deeply differ. At the end of the book, Naomi approaches challenges pacifistically, because she knows that is what Ruea would want from her. Ruea, meanwhile, learns that there are things in life worth fighting for, namely Naomi.

### **Future Directions**

Of course, *The Book of Naomi* is still a work in progress. The third draft will be even more polished, thematically sound, and well-paced than the current one. The most important task in the next draft will be tying the sections more closely together. I intend to foreshadow

the events on Triasmus and the space mall more clearly in the first few sections, and to make the pirate captain more threatening and memorable when she is first introduced. I also intend to expand on the translator malfunctions that are such major plot points early in the book and continue them throughout, making the failure of communication and the power of love to transcend language a theme.

I want to explore Naomi's relationship with Judaism more deeply, as well, and so I intend to add another section addressing Judaism directly. Our protagonists will, at Ruea's urging, visit a far-flung Jewish family during the holiday of Rosh HaShanah, and Naomi will have to examine why being in Jewish spaces makes her so uncomfortable, and possibly get over it. This section will also set up the idea that Ruea is considering conversion. Naomi needs to be surprised by her decision, but the reader shouldn't be, and there is little to suggest her attitude to Judaism in the narrative currently.

Naomi's grandmother presents me with both a problem and an opportunity. Currently, she is a vestige from a previous draft, an interesting character with nothing to do. And she *is* interesting: she is a queer war veteran with PTSD, a woman who has always prized her autonomy now too old to live alone. She made a lot more sense when she had to rescue the protagonists, but since that plot point is gone, all she can do is be snappish to Ruea. I may cut her all together, or move her to a different story, but I suspect there's an interesting role for her to fill in this story. I am not yet sure what it is; perhaps I will find it when I come up with the third version of the ending.

Finally, I need to vary the structure of the fight scenes. As they stand, they are almost all the same: Naomi jumps whoever her opponent is, disarms them, but ends up pinned anyway. Then, someone, usually Ruea, hits the opponent on the back of the head with some

blunt object, knocking them out. There are minor variations (the police break up Naomi and Nearana's fight, not Ruea), but largely, they follow this pattern. It is clear that there is a kind of choreography I'm comfortable with, but comfort is the enemy of creativity.

I actually quite like my story as it stands, but like Robert Frost, I have miles to go before I sleep.

### **Conclusion**

*The Book of Naomi* has been a three year labor of love. It contains much of my personal worldview, as well as ideas from my favorite fiction. Every aspect, from the preliminary reading to the writing to the revising has challenged me intellectually and emotionally. It is not complete, but I am deeply proud of the way it has turned out. It truly is the culmination of my time here at Appalachian State University.

Appendix A: Reading list

*Books that influenced The Book of Naomi, sorted by author or editor's last name.*

*Includes but is not limited to works mentioned in the supplementary discourse.*

Atwood, Margaret, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Bradley, Marion Zimmer, *The Mists of Avalon*

Bray, Libba, *Going Bovine*

Bronte, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*

Bronte, Emily, *Wuthering Heights*

Brown, Pierce, *Red Rising*

Butler, Octavia, *Kindred*

Cashore, Kristin, *Graceling*

Chambers, Becky, *A Long Way To A Small, Angry Planet*

Cohen, Deborah Bodin, *Lilith's Ark*

Dann, Jack, *Wandering Stars*

Edwards, Janet, *Earth Girl*

Elgin, Suzette Haden, *Native Tongue*

Garden, Nancy, *Annie on my Mind*

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *Herland*

Glassman, Shira, *The Second Mango*

Griffith, Nicola, *Ammonite*

Jemisin, N.K., *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

LeGuin, Ursula K., *The Left Hand of Darkness*

L'engle, Madeleine, *A Wrinkle in Time*



Lester, Julius, *Pharaoh's Daughter: A Novel of Ancient Egypt*

Lo, Malinda, *Ash*

Lomax, E. Jade, *Beanstalk*

London, Alex, *Proxy*

McGuire, Seanan, *Queers Destroy Science Fiction!*

Pierce, Tamora, *The Will of the Empress*

Piercy, Marge, *He, She, and It*

Pinsker, Sarah, "In the Dawns Between Hours" (short story)

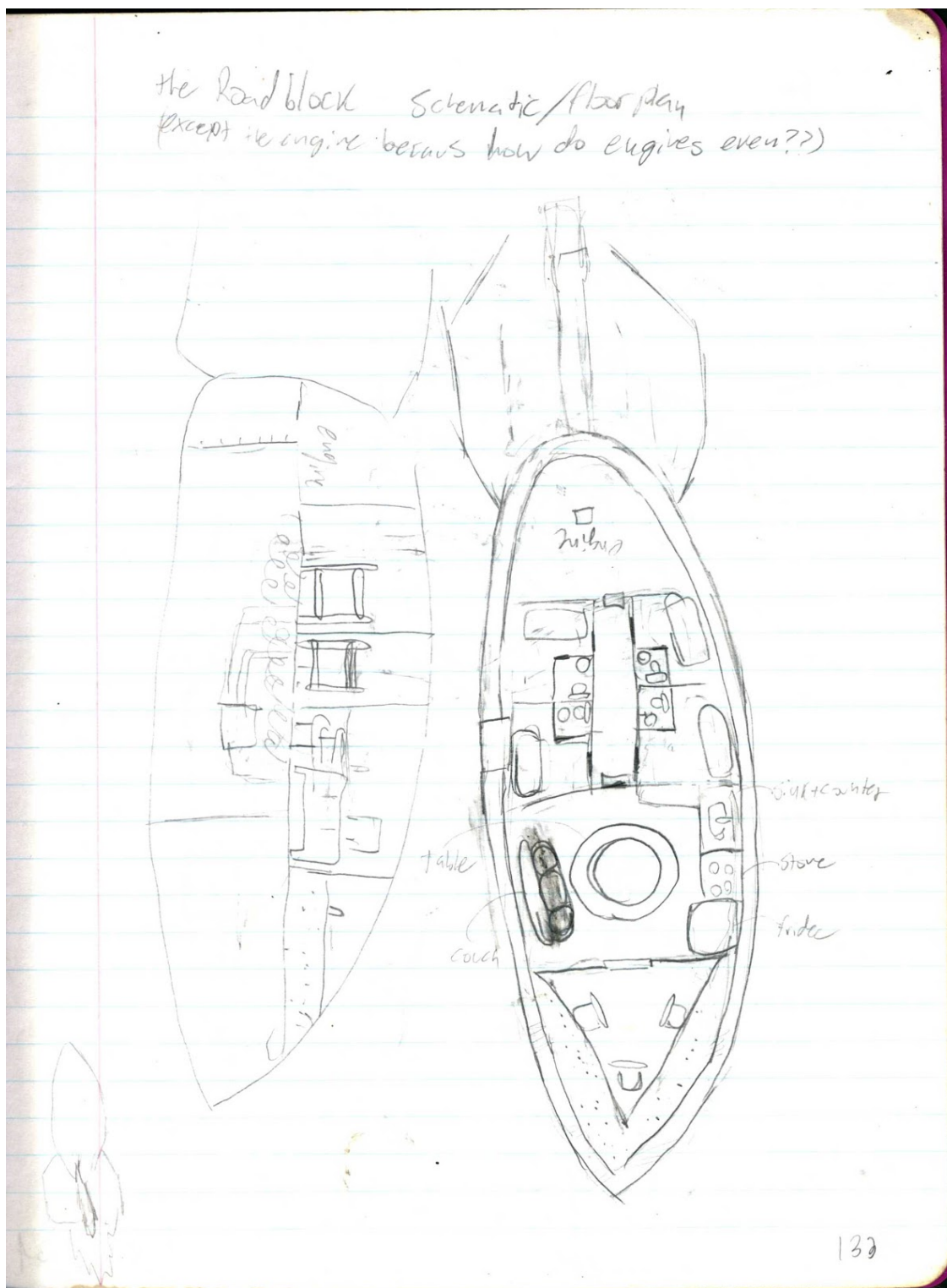
Raphael, Lev, *Dancing on Tisha B'av*

Skrutskie, Emily, *The Abyss Surrounds Us*

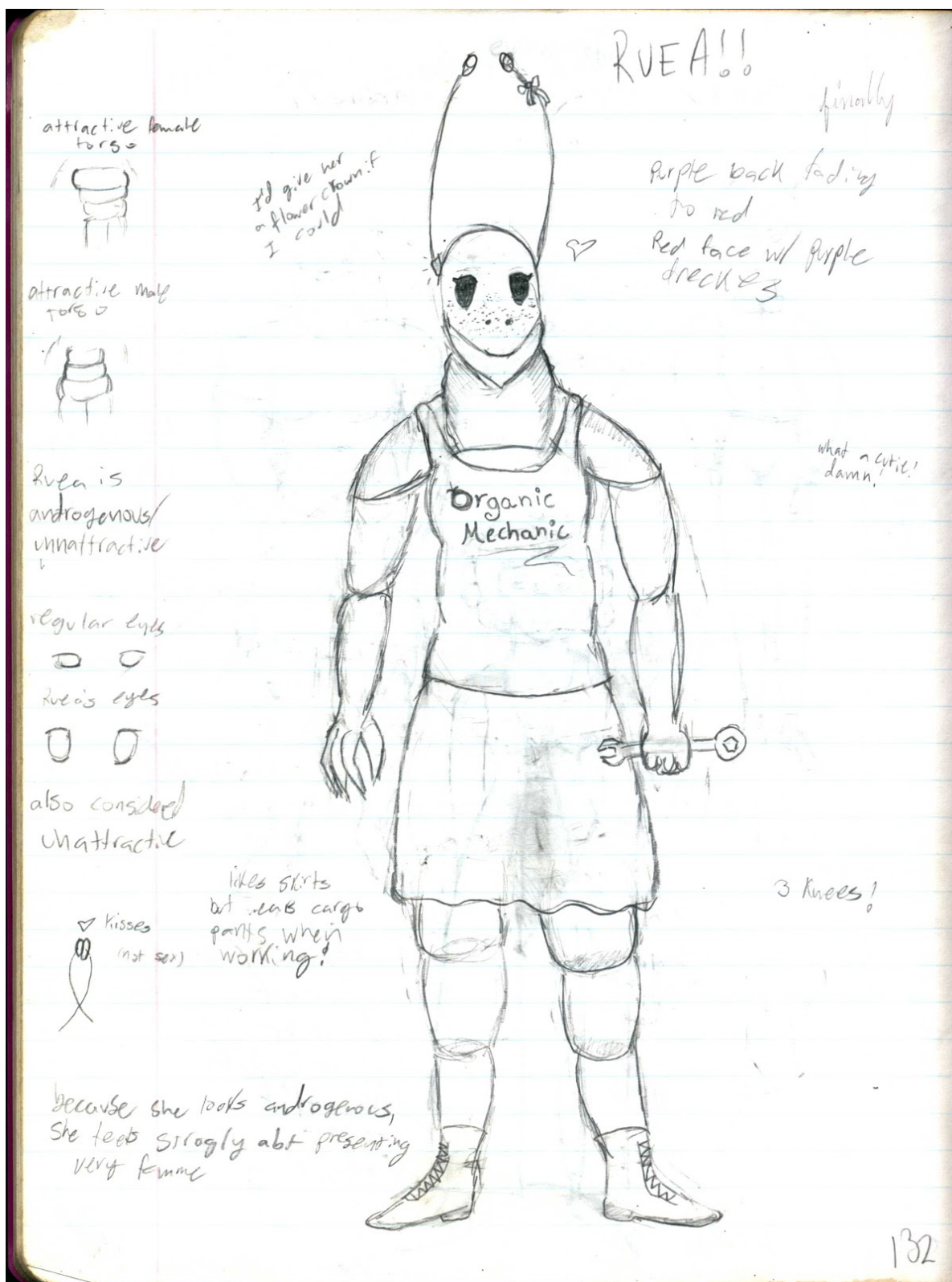
VanderMeer, Jeff, *Annihilation*

Zipres, Jack, *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*

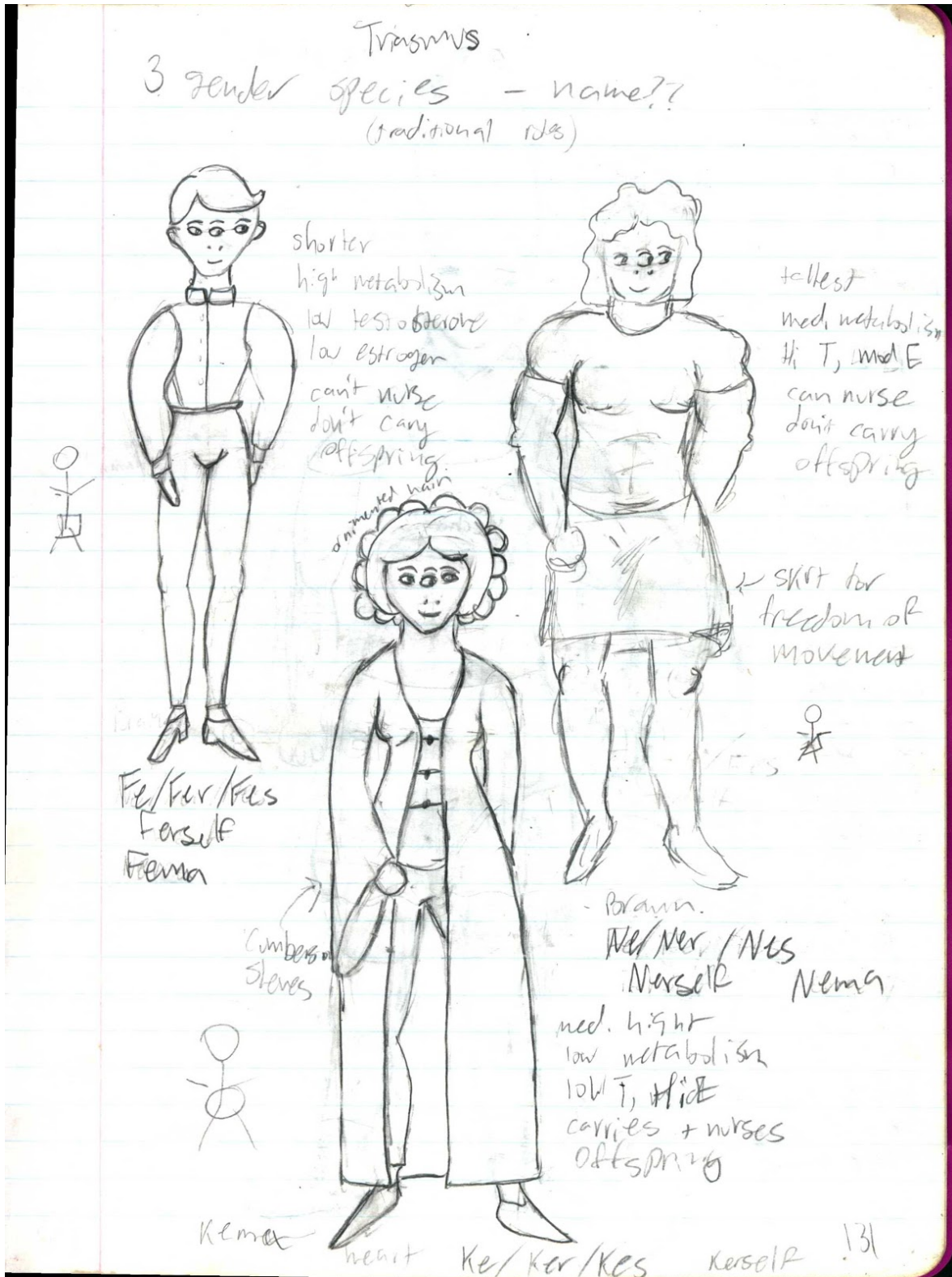
Appendix B: Concept art, worldbuilding notes, outlining notes



Schematic of The Roadblock



Ruea's character design and notes on Crustean biology and beauty standards.



Design and notes for "typical" Triasmians

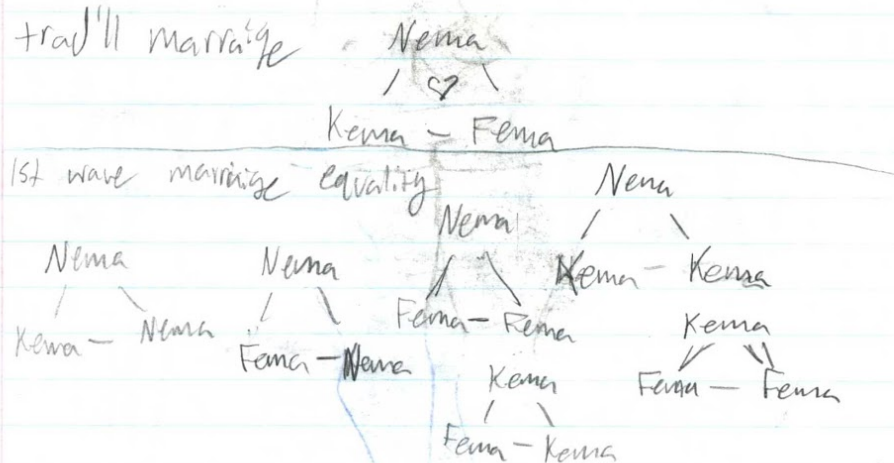


## 3 gender species cont

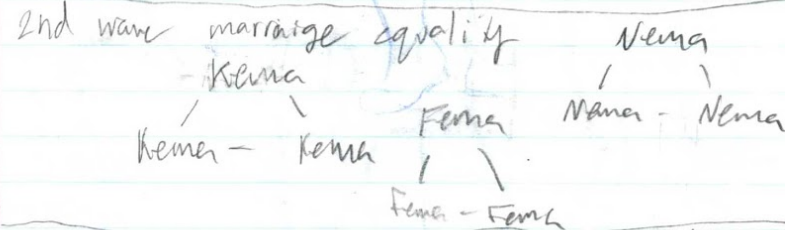
initial Nemian rchy Femina > Nema = Kema  
 post Feminist revolution Femina ≥ Nema > Kema  
 violent → post Kemalist Revolt Kema > Nema > Femina  
 post Gender laws Kema > Femina > Nema

pushed  
prior law

trad'l marriage



2nd wave marriage equality



Disaster \*

Moved to  
first cities

3rd wave marriage equality - 2 + 4 person marriages  
 4th wave - 5 person marriages

trans + intersex ppl accepted btw 1 + 2  
 No ppl accepted btw 2 + 3

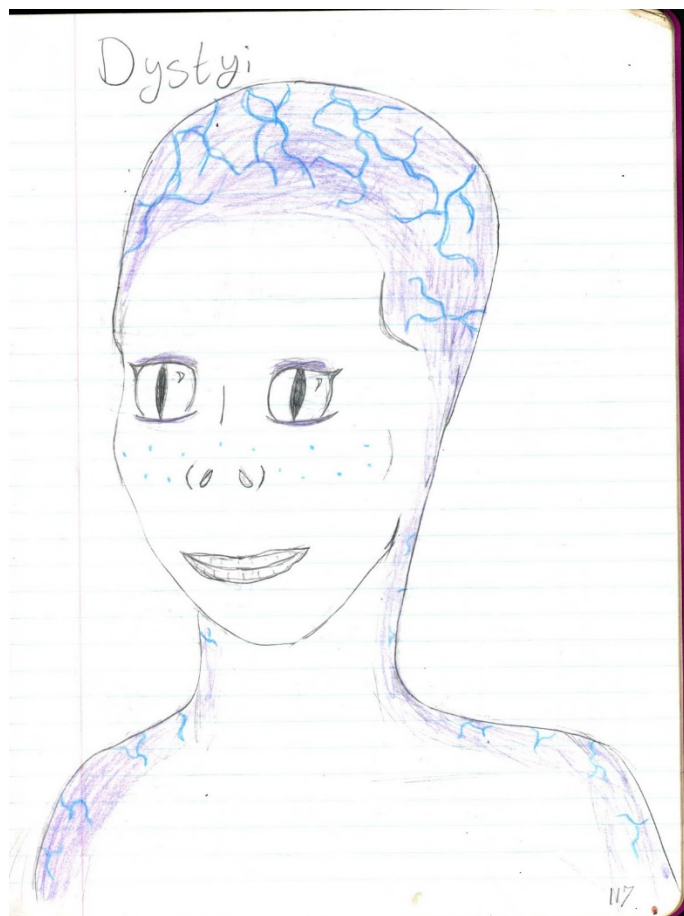
still on track

All this is by law, Obvs public opinion  
 changed before + after rulings

00000

129

Design for a Ysi woman



Design for a Dystyi woman

<p>Crash 7K 1st</p> <table> <tr> <td>Ship blows up</td> <td>Inciting incident</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Escape together</td> <td>Character building</td> </tr> <tr> <td>decide to Haul</td> <td>Introduce external conflict + goal</td> </tr> <tr> <td>get ship + ship</td> <td>going home</td> </tr> <tr> <td>take off</td> <td>Rue's ex</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Naomi's religion</td> </tr> </table>	Ship blows up	Inciting incident	Escape together	Character building	decide to Haul	Introduce external conflict + goal	get ship + ship	going home	take off	Rue's ex		Naomi's religion	<p>Pirates 1.5K 2nd</p> <table> <tr> <td>go thru asteroids</td> <td>Introduces Rue's issue v Killing</td> </tr> <tr> <td>space grappling hook</td> <td>Introduces surprise boss</td> </tr> <tr> <td>fight pirates</td> <td>Proves N is competent</td> </tr> <tr> <td>clever plan</td> <td>foreshadows criminal past</td> </tr> <tr> <td>talk about Rue's past</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	go thru asteroids	Introduces Rue's issue v Killing	space grappling hook	Introduces surprise boss	fight pirates	Proves N is competent	clever plan	foreshadows criminal past	talk about Rue's past	
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Revision notes for the second draft.

Top: Working title, estimated word count, order.

Right: Major events in the section. "Plot"

Left: Effect those events have on the characters, their relationship, and the overall narrative. "Story"